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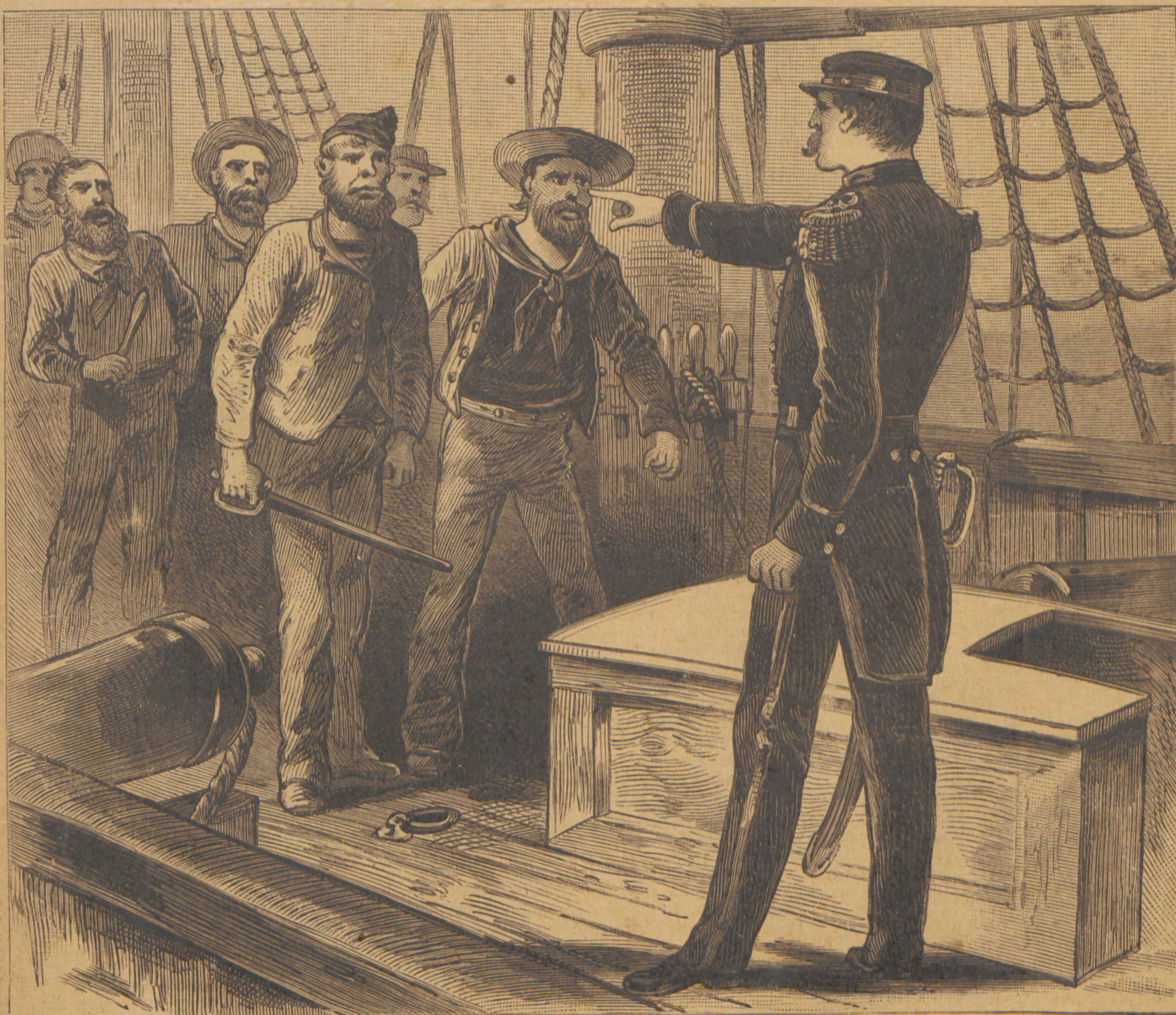
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Vol. XXXIV.

BILLY BRINE, THE SWAMP FOX;

Or, SHADOWING THE SMUGGLER SCHOONER.



"TAKE THOSE SMUGGLERS BELOW!" ORDERED CAPTAIN BRONSON.

Billy Brine, THE SWAMP FOX; OR, Shadowing the Smuggler Schooner.

BY CHAS. F. WELLES

CHAPTER I.

ON BOARD THE "WATCHDOG."

SHARP and clear, the gong in the engine-room signaled "stop"; the massive machinery ceased its motion, and the United States Revenue Cutter "Watchdog" came to a standstill.

"There, the order has come at last."

Engineer Jack Robbins removed his hands from the lever as he uttered the words, and turning to his assistant-added: "I've been expecting it for the last twenty minutes."

"What time is it gettin' to be?" asked his companion, an honest looking fellow arrayed in blue blouse and overalls.

"Half an hour past midnight. Funny time of night to stop the ship in this out-of-the-way spot, ain't it? I tell you, Jim, you may not have noticed anything unusual going on, but there's something going to drop during the next four or five hours."

"Where are we, anyhow?"

"Blessed if I know only we're close to the Florida Coast. Jim, do you know who's commanding this vessel, to-night?"

"Captain Bronson, I suppose. I don't know who's got a better right."

"You're wrong. You know that young fellow, Brine?"

"The chap that came aboard just before we left port, with the yeller nigger tagging after him?"

"That's who I mean. You may not believe it, but Captain Bronson has turned the vessel over to him. He's been running the whole concern ever since nightfall."

The other looked incredulous.

"I've been wondering what them fellers come aboard for. I thought at first, and so did the other boys, that they was new men j'ined ther crew, but that ain't so, fer neither of them has done a lick o' work since they stepped foot on the deck. Did Captain Bronson have some other object in having them aboard?"

"You'd think so if you'd seen young Brine this afternoon. He was in the captain's cabin talking, and the captain was listening as respectfully as though the kid was one of the big guns of the Department."

"So?" said the other, and added, laughing as he glanced down at his blue overalls and greasy blouse:

"I am afraid I shall never have that honor. The youngster must know something important to stand in so."

"He does. He's a regular swamp fox. He knows where the game is, all right," nodding his head knowingly. "I have an idea that they are not far from here now, and that before morning they will either be roped in, or driven from their holes. The boys are getting ready for them."

"So?" again said his companion, questioningly. "I didn't think we was so close, but I've known for several hours that something was in the wind. Well, Jack, I'm glad we ain't in it. I'd rather be down in this old engine-room with all its smell and grease, than to push my way through muddy swamps after smugglers, and liable to get shot any minute. But I believe I'll go up on deck and see how things are."

He left the engine-room and went above.

The moon was about an hour high, and when not obscured by patches of clouds that

studded the sky, shone weirdly, on the waste of water, disclosing a dark shore-line only a few hundred yards away.

A dead silence hung over the cutter, notwithstanding that a group of men were gathered together in one part of the ship.

The moonlight glimmering on the barrels of numerous carbines and the metal work on the butts of several pistols that peeped from their holsters, told that the men were heavily armed.

Two or three officers were conversing in whispers near the quarter, while up in the bows the engineer's assistant noticed two more, seemingly engaged in an earnest conversation as they stood by the rail.

"That's Captain Bronson and that young Billy Brine," muttered the man, "standing there with their heads together. I reckon there is something in the wind. We ain't layin' off here at this time o' night for nothing."

He was right. There was "something in the wind," and had he been a little closer he might have learned a few things regarding that evident fact.

"And you know the waterways in yonder swamp like a book, you say?"

It was Captain Bronson who spoke the words in a low tone to the young fellow at his side.

"Like a book," repeated his companion. "Not over two miles from the coast is the haunt of the smugglers. It looks like a hopeless task to try to find anything in the dark in such a tangled mass of woods and waters, but I know the place, as I said before, for I have been over it many a time, and can take your men right to it."

"You shall do it," said the Captain, decidedly. "I will send a squad of men under the command of an officer, but the expedition will be subject to your orders."

He turned away and gave an order in a low tone, and immediately one of the cutter's long boats was loosed from its davits and, as noiselessly as possible, was lowered to the water.

Then the armed band, numbering sixteen besides the officer, Billy and his friend Ebony, his mulatto companion, slid down into the boat.

The three above mentioned were the last to leave.

Billy hesitated. For the first time, a sense of the responsibility thrown on the young fellow, dawned on his mind, and for a moment he felt a fearful dread that he was incompetent to carry out the task set before him.

But the thought of the exciting work in which he was to be a leader, stimulated his adventurous spirit, and he hastily scrambled down into the waiting boat, only anxious now to be off.

Under eight pairs of oars she shot away from the cutter, and glided off into the gloom.

Close by his side was sitting the mulatto. As the shore line grew darker and more distinct as the boat swept on over the moonlit water, so the cutter grew dimmer until she was but a dim blur in the hazy light that hung over land and sea.

"Slower!" ordered the young fellow, as he rose erect to better pierce the darkness ahead, for they were almost upon the shore now, and unless Billy had calculated correctly, the boat would be grounded.

Her speed slackened and almost before the men knew it the boat had entered the swamp.

She was advancing up a narrow waterway, its quiet surface gleaming with a silvery shimmer where the shadow of the trees that grew along its sides, did not fall upon it.

The oars had been muffled and the subdued sound of the dipping blades was but barely audible.

"We hain't fur ter go now," whispered

Ebony, or, as he was more often called, "Eb."

"But half a mile," tersely answered Billy. "There's some open water to cross yet—ah, here we are now."

The spot mentioned had been reached.

Off to the left the glimmer of the moonlight on the water told that they had entered a lake thickly studded with tiny islands.

On, on past these islands the boat plunged.

The silence was oppressive—nothing can exceed the desolation which broods over these great swamps.

"Look, Eb, look!" suddenly said Billy, in a whisper. "Isn't that a boat off yonder?"

"I reckon it be," replied Eb, gazing ahead with all his eyes. "It moved, anyhow. I see'd it slide between a couple o' dem islands ahead dar. Who kin it be, Mar's Billy?"

But, Billy did not reply.

The discovery had filled him with alarm for it meant nothing else than that the enemy was abroad and aware of their presence in the swamp!

"Pull, boys, pull!" urged Billy in a low but earnest tone. "I believe some of the enemy are ahead there behind one of them islands."

The boat plunged ahead with added speed, entered the shadow of the island and dashed on by.

Billy, with his revolver clutched tightly in his hand, crouched in the stern.

"Bang! bang!"

Two flashes of fire spurted from the edge of the island and in the same instant a boat with two occupants was seen to glide away from the island, was visible for a moment on the open water and then vanished among the reeds that grew in bunches all over the watery waste.

Just about the time that Billy Brine and the men under his charge were debarking from the cutter, two men stood conversing in whispers on the other side of the vessel near the quarter.

"I tell you, old man," one was saying, "we have got to do something, and mighty quick too. That young devil will knock everything to pieces if we don't head him off. He knows those waters as well as the boys themselves."

"Just keep cool!" answered the other. "We can head him off all right, but to do it we have got to get ashore first. There's the small boat over the stern. We will cut her loose. Nobody is looking. Come on. It's our only chance."

Silently the two men proceeded to the stern, taking a coil of rope with them as they went.

This they fastened to the boat, which was hardly larger than an ordinary skiff, and cutting the tackle that secured it to the davits, lowered it carefully to the water.

"This saves the squeaking of tackle-blocks," muttered one. "I've got her fastened. Slide down and let's be off before any of them catch on."

In less than a minute the boat was noiselessly creeping away from the cutter, gliding off in a different direction from that taken by the large boat.

On, on it went until safe from the sight of those aboard the "Watch-dog;" then its course was changed and it made rapidly for the shore.

None of the officers or men aboard the cutter noticed the strange departure of two of her crew.

After the larger boat had disappeared Captain Bronson strode up and down the deck with his hands behind his back.

The dim figures of the officers and men seemed asleep, so immovable were they as they waited in the dead silence of that midnight hour. The steamer herself seemed slumbering, the only signs or motion about her being the smoke that crept steadily

from the funnel in a thin but apparently exhaustless volume and floated away.

Perhaps two hours passed in this way, and then all were made suddenly wide-awake by the sound of the fire-arms.

Looking shoreward whence the sounds came, they could see the blazing of the weapons, looking like two bunches of giant fireflies, and showing that the belligerents were not more than twenty-five yards apart.

"By George, Roswell," said Captain Bronson to his second lieutenant, "there's a hot fight there. Our boys have roused them up, or can it be that Garth and his gang have chased them out of the swamp?"

CHAPTER II.

GARTH AND HIS GANG ON TOP.

Two shots from Billy's revolver answered those from the strangers, but there was not a sound to indicate that the balls had hit either the boat or its occupants.

The blue-jackets had ceased rowing and the boat was barely moving.

"Here's a nice mess," said Billy. "No use to try to catch those fellows and yet they will likely get the alarm to their friends before we can rope them in. After them, anyway!"

The boat was brought around and started in pursuit. But in that tangled mass of reeds and islands it was of little use—not a trace of the boat rewarded their search and they were forced to give it up.

"We can destroy their rendezvous, anyway," said Billy. "If the birds have flown we will hunt them up later."

The boat plunged ahead through the quiet waters of the swamp with a speed that made Billy seize the tiller with a nervous grip and keep his eyes wide open, for steering the swift speeding boat along the narrow and devious waterways was no child's play.

This somewhat reckless pace was continued for perhaps ten minutes and then at Billy's order, the boat slowed up.

"We are close on 'em now," whispered Ebony.

"Yes," replied Billy in the same cautious whisper, and, to the men:

"Careful, boys! Their hang-out isn't twenty yards away."

The boat was in the shadow but swerved sharply and crept across a moonlit space of water and stopped quietly against the bank of a little wooded island.

All stepped ashore.

There was exciting work close at hand and the men fingered their arms expectantly and buckled their belts a little tighter.

"Follow me," whispered Billy, and started off through the dark woods.

Noiselessly as shadows the sixteen men filed after him.

Suddenly they stopped.

They had reached a clearing in the woods and in its center the moonlight shone on a large, one-story house built of heavy, rough timber.

The house was as silent as the tomb, but a light streaming through a crack, gave evidence that some one was within.

"There is an opening or window on the other side," said the young leader, pointing to a square aperture covered by a huge shutter made of boards that served as a window. "Those are the only means of escape for them besides the doors."

Three men were detailed to guard each window, while Billy with the others moved around to the side where the door was.

Billy paused a moment before the door, and then placed his hand on the rude latch and shook it.

The door refused to open.

"We've got 'em, anyhow," muttered the young fellow. "No use in tryin' to make a sneak on 'em with our force." Then he added in a loud tone, at the same time shaking the latch:

"Your time is up, boys. We are Revenue men and we want you, and have got enough to take you dead or alive. Come, what is it? Surrender or have your shanty burned over your heads? Answer quick."

No reply.

Billy gave the door a vigorous kick.

Still no response.

"All together now!" said he, in an angry voice to the waiting blue-jackets. "We will break in the door. If they fire on us it will be the worse for them. We will let them know we are not to be fooled with."

The door, strong as it was, resisted only a moment or two the weight of the sturdy forms pressed against it and then gave way with a crash.

Billy, revolver in hand, pushed into the room.

"Nobody at home," he ejaculated in surprise.

The place afforded no concealment for any one as the furniture consisted only of two or three bunks and a few stools. On a rough pine table at one side stood the dingy lamp that lighted the apartment.

"They can't have been gone long," said Billy, piqued at the escape of the game they had counted on so easily capturing. "It will not do though, to fool away any time here. We will call again. Hark, boys! What's that?"

All held their breath and listened.

"It sounded like some one scuffling right outside the window that I left those fellows to guard."

"I heard it," whispered Ebony, moving up close to Billy. "It war jest ezactly like some one er fussin'."

"Some of the boys stumblin' round in the dark, I s'pose," said Billy, but to satisfy himself he left the room, followed by Ebony who seemed to be decidedly alarmed about something.

The blue-jackets remained in the room, waiting and listening expectantly.

A moment later they heard Eb shouting, excitedly:

"Look out thar, Mars' Billy! Cut an' run! Oh, golly, we're goners!"

Three or four pistol-shots rung out in quick succession, followed by the sound of hurrying feet approaching the house.

Within the room the silence which the men of the "Watchdog" had maintained, was broken by a sharp chorus of "clicks," as the hammers of the carbines were brought to a full cock.

They knew now that the enemy were close at hand, and that a collision and a fight were inevitable.

As a body they moved toward the door, but before the two in advance reached the threshold three or four more shots rung out and they reeled and fell to the floor.

A loud, ruffianly yell of exultation came from outside where the enemy were hidden by the darkness.

The revenue men paused, appalled at the fate of their friends.

"That's what ther rest o' yer'll get if ye try ter leave that room!" cried a loud voice.

"We've got yer cornered. Throw down yer guns an' give up ther fight. We-uns don't want ter kill yer but'll do it if ye don't knuckle under. Throw down yer guns an' be in er hurry about it, too, or we'll pour lead inter yer till ye'r cleaned out. Come away from that lamp."

One of the men had edged toward the table where the lamp was sitting, hoping to extinguish it and in the darkness following, rush out with his mates and either escape or fight the enemy on more even terms.

As he moved toward the table, the shutters covering one of the windows opened and a rifle barrel was leveled through it at him.

He stopped.

"Boys, they've got us," said he, and tossed his revolver and carbine upon the floor at the other side of the room.

The others followed his example, for, though brave men, they realized fully that they were at the mercy of the enemy who had outwitted them and that resistance meant death. There was nothing for them to do but yield.

When the last firearm had been cast aside they folded their arms and sullenly awaited the next act in the drama.

A rough-looking and roughly dressed man, followed by a dozen more even rougher looking than himself, strode into the room.

The leader was the noted smuggler, Sam Garth, a tall, stalwart fellow with a drooping mustache and a stubble of a beard on his massive jaws. He scrutinized his prisoners sharply, a sneering light of triumph lurking in his dark eyes.

Dropping the breech of his rifle on the floor he rested his hands across the muzzle and said with a leer:

"Euchred, ain't ye? What do ye expect ter do about it, anyway? Ye found out whar Sam Garth's hidin'-place is. Think ye got paid fer yer visit?"

"None of the Revenue men made any reply."

"Don't ye want ter send word ter yer friends on ther 'Watchdog,' an' tell 'em of your success? They'll be liable ter get tired o' watchin' I'm er thinkin'."

But, the captured Revenue men were still sullenly silent.

"Wal, boys, they won't talk. Blamed if I know what ter do with ther cusses," scowling. "March 'em inter ther next room there."

Part of the prisoners were taken into another apartment not so large and with no openings but the door and a square hole in the wall.

There were two of these rooms and the prisoners were divided between them.

"They can't get out of there," declared Garth after the heavy doors had been securely fastened. "We'll leave 'em till mornin' an' then we'll see what's ter be done with 'em. Come, let's be gettin' outer here."

The prisoners, confined in the darkness of their small, uncomfortable prisons, heard the heavy tramping of the outlaws as they filed out of the larger room and then all was still.

"Boys, this is tough," at last remarked one of the Revenue men. "How this thing will end is what gets me; it's a pretty fizzle, so far. But I'd like to know one thing."

"What is that?" queried some one.

"Just this: whether Billy Brine and that nigger of his are dead or alive—whether they got away or are in the clutches of the smugglers."

CHAPTER III.

SHADOWING THE SMUGGLERS.

BILLY, with the faithful Eb close behind him, hurried around toward the window which he had left guarded by three of the cutter's men.

It was very dark, but his sharp eyes distinguished in the deep gloom five or six figures advancing noiselessly upon him as if to surround him.

Eb discovered them at the same moment and gave his warning cry.

Billy saw at once that the tables had been turned upon them; that the expedition to capture the smugglers was a failure; that in some way they had been warned of the attack and were themselves the surprisers; yet, without a moment's hesitation he dashed through the line of dark forms gathering about him and rushed for the timber close at hand.

He heard some one crashing behind him but knew not whether it was his mulatto friend or the smuggler gang.

"Lucky for me," thought he, "that I have been over this ground before, else I would be at my wits' ends to know where to go. I

hope that's Eb behind me but there's more than one and there's no telling one from another. If it's Eb he'll know where to find me."

Billy had once before, when playing detective on his own hook, shadowed the smugglers to this haunt of theirs and had noted particularly all the surrounding points.

He was nimble of foot and knowing the place as well as the outlaws themselves, discovered he was gaining on them with the exception of that one person who managed to keep close in his rear.

Running across an open spot in the woods which the moonlight flooded, Billy paused in the shadow on the opposite side.

Turning, he caught a glimpse of his pursuer.

It was Eb.

Hearing no sound to direct his mad pursuit he stopped close by Billy and the latter grasped him by the arm, smothering his cry of sudden astonishment by pressing his hand over his mouth.

"Come," whispered Billy. "This way. Careful now, those fellows are close behind."

He drew the mulatto to one side and together they stole noiselessly through the woods.

In another moment the pursuers entered the open spot and stopped.

"I can't hear a sound," they heard one fellow say. "Which way did they go?"

"Give it up," replied a rough voice.

"Not by a darn sight," declared another. "It won't do ter give it up. Them fellers knows too much ter be left hangin' round loose."

"I reckon they're on ther island yet," said another. "Taint goin' ter do 'em any good ter swim away fer they can't get outer ther swamp that-away nur walk. They'll likely sneak around ter where they left their boat an' then our boys there'll rope 'em in. That boat o' theirs is ther only way they have o' gettin' off, fur they'd never stumble outer ther dugout."

Billy could hardly repress a chuckle as he heard this, and nudging his companion, whispered:

"Eb, I think we'll fool 'em."

Eb simply squeezed Billy's hand in answer.

"Wal, boys," some one said. "Thar ain't no use in monkeyin' round here. We cain't find ther skunks in these yere mis'ble woods an' so we'd better go back ter ther house. I'm kinder cur'us ter know how things come out an' how Cap'n Garth fixed them fellers. I heerd er couple er shots erwhile ago an' I'll bet somebody got popped over."

The men left the open spot and vanished in the dark woods.

The sound of their footsteps was soon lost and a dead silence again hung over all.

"Come, Eb," said Billy; "we'll see if we can't manage to stumble onto that dug-out."

Steadily they pushed on through the woods. Here and there where the trees grew but sparsely, the moonbeams lighted the way for them but more often they were forced to grope in utter darkness.

Finally they paused.

The edge of the island had been reached and Billy pushed his way along the bank; then stopped and peered into some bushes.

"Here it is," he whispered, in a satisfied way.

At their feet lay a small craft hollowed out from a log; a rather clumsy-looking affair but large enough to accommodate two persons.

Two roughly-hewn paddles were lying within.

Billy seated himself and seized one of the paddles while Eb did the same.

"We've got to do some scouting now, Eb," said Billy, "and we've got to be

mighty sly about it, too. Garth and his men won't likely stay on the island to-night and if they leave we want to follow and see where they go. If they've got another house on some island in the swamp I want to know it, and if—and it's more likely—they've a vessel of some kind hidden away in one of the network of streams here I want to locate it, for we would never find it unless we was taken right to it and it's important that we find it if there's one here. So you see, old man, we want to go easy and keep our eyes open. And now that you understand the program, push off."

Eb gave a shove with the paddle and the dug-out glided out of the little inlet where it had been lying.

The moon shone full upon them now, but they were not apprehensive on that account as there was no one on the opposite side of the stream to see them, and the search on the island had been given up. Besides, the banks of the island were steep and being fringed with rank shrubbery backed by a heavy growth of timber, one would have had to have been on the very edge of the island to have discerned the boat creeping along so carefully below.

"Run her in between those reeds," whispered Billy.

The dug-out was stopped in the shelter of some reeds growing in a bunch in the water behind which they had a good view of the water while concealed themselves.

Perhaps ten minutes they waited and then their lonely vigil was rewarded by the sight of a boat that came creeping, as it seemed, right out of the island.

The boat was a large one and heavily loaded with men.

Under powerful strokes it rushed away from the island, making straight for a broad watercourse that reached out in almost a bee-line from the point where the dug-out lay.

The boat steadily grew dimmer as it receded down the moonlit water, sometimes being swallowed up entirely by the shadows of the trees that overhung the water, then appearing again like a blurred blot crawling along or a detached piece of the shadow itself.

"Come Eb," said Billy, "we must be moving. They can't see us now and I'm afraid we won't be able to see them much longer for they are going through it faster than we can hope to follow, because it will be hard work to make any time with this old log."

Yet they were surprised at the speed they could get out of the clumsy craft, and they had the satisfaction of not losing sight of the object of their pursuit. They were not going as swift, however, as the other boat when she started away from the island and the boys in the dug-out concluded that the other boat had slowed up.

Keeping in the shadows along the banks as much as possible Billy and his companion plied the paddles vigorously to get what speed they could out of the dug-out.

The boat ahead was now but an indistinct blotch and as Billy was watching it, it suddenly vanished.

Eb noticed its disappearance at the same time and said, bewildered:

"She's gone, Mars' Billy. Wha' now?"

"Keep right on," ordered the other. "They have turned into some adjoining stream or open spot of water. We will see them again," and added vehemently as if to himself, "we must."

But even as he spoke Billy knew there was little likelihood of their seeing the boat again as the swamp was a tangled network of water courses, and he had no idea which one the other boat would take after leaving the main channel.

Nevertheless he urged Eb to renewed efforts and the dug-out fairly shot on through the water.

At last they reached the place where Billy believed the other boat had left the main stream.

Up this stream the boat was turned.

After paddling for five minutes Billy had the dug-out stopped.

They listened intently.

There was not a sound to break the dead silence of the swamp.

"Wha' yer goin' ter do now?" asked Eb. "Dem fellers has jest drapped outer sight an' ther hain't no use much o' lookin' fer 'em in dis yer' swamp."

"I don't believe they're far off," replied Billy, loth to give up. "We'll hunt awhile more. Maybe we can stumble onto them or a cabin or something."

Eb shook his head dubiously as he glanced around at the impenetrable tangle of thick-foliaged trees bearing their added weight of clinging vines and moss, but he seized the paddle and the dug-out crept on.

The swamp had now become a perfect net-work of streams, broadening here and there into little lakes.

The dug-out kept on and entered on a stretch of water considerably broader than the one down which they had followed the smugglers, and, like the other, lined with heavy timber.

No sooner had the dug-out pushed its nose into this channel than Eb exclaimed in a startled whisper:

"Look, look, Mars' Billy! Wha' that?"

To Billy it seemed like an eye of fire shining in the darkness that enwrapped the shores of the stream.

They rubbed their eyes and stared.

There it was—a great ball of fire in a bed of blackness, shining there like a blazing star.

"Wha' is it?" again queried Eb. "A ha'nt?" and his voice trembled a little. "Yo' sho' it hain't a ha'nt, Mars' Billy?"

"No, Eb, it isn't any ha'nt," replied Billy. "It's more likely the light from the window of some house on the bank of the stream. We'll see," and he eagerly brought the dug-out around and drove his paddle deep into the water.

"Careful now, Eb. No noise," and the boat slid along as silently as a shadow, Eb considerably unstrung by a superstitious fear of the mysterious light, notwithstanding what his more enlightened friend had said.

Brighter and brighter it seemed to grow as they neared it, and its surroundings to become more black.

"That don't come from any house," muttered Billy, as the moonlight disclosed the forest close to one side of the light. "What can it be anyway?"

Closer crept the dug-out that was now edging along near the shore, where the darkness was intense.

The mysterious ball of fire cast a narrow shaft of light out into the night.

Right up to the light glided the boat, and then silently and without warning, the light vanished.

For a moment they could see nothing, and then Billy grasped Eb by the arm and whispered as he pointed ahead:

"See, Eb. There's your ha'nt."

Right ahead of them, close to the shore, was a big black body, now easily distinguishable as a vessel's hull.

That it was such the masts and spars, clearly painted, against the starlit sky, testified.

The boys had made an unexpected and important discovery, and Billy determined to profit by it.

CHAPTER IV.

GARTH SCORES ANOTHER POINT.

"Eb," whispered Billy, "we must get aboard that vessel. Garth and his men are aboard I am certain, and I want to know what

they intend to do. You stay in the dug-out and wait for me. I won't need you."

"Golly, Mars' Billy," said Eb, "it's mighty risky ter sneak aboard when them fellers is there. Better lemme go 'long too."

But Billy refused.

The dug-out was run up against the bank and Billy managed, as dark as it was, to get safely ashore and disappeared among the tangle of trees.

Pushing on, he found the vessel moored close to the bank.

It was not difficult to leap from the shore to the bulwarks of the vessel.

Though the moon was shining, all was dark on the vessel's deck on account of the shadow from the trees on shore, but the masts could be seen stretching out above the gloom below, showing the craft to be a two masted schooner.

As Billy became used to the darkness he found he could distinguish objects about him; could follow the line of bulwarks and make out a cabin or deck house between the masts and a smaller one aft the mainmast.

The vessel was about eighteen feet beam.

The deck was deserted with the exception of himself and the silence was oppressive.

Yet he knew that the vessel was not deserted and that the gang were at that moment below decks.

"The men would be in the fore-castle likely," reasoned he, "but Garth and his closest friends would probably be in the cabin under the quarter deck. It's their conversation I want to hear."

He stole forward and found the hatch over the fore-castle closed.

He listened. He could hear voices below, but faintly.

"That's where the greater part of the gang is, I s'pose, but it's Captain Sam Garth, as they call him, that I want to find. I have an idea that the light we saw came from the cabin window and that he closed the shutter or curtain or something fearing some prowling Revenue spy might see it.

Though this was merely a surmise on his part it was the true solution of the disappearance of the light.

He slipped noiselessly into the little deck house aft the mainmast and began to cautiously feel his way down the steps that led below.

It was intensely dark where he was now; he could not see his hand before his face. A false step, a collision with something movable meant an alarm and a possible capture.

Had he possessed a bull's-eye lantern he would have used it, risky though it would have been, but he did not have one.

He reached the bottom of the steps.

He knew not which way to go, dark as it was, and being at his wits' ends, struck a match.

He allowed it to flicker only long enough for him to obtain a general idea of his surroundings and then extinguished it.

He had seen the way that led to the cabin and proceeded to follow it up as well as he could in the dark.

In fact the cabin door was close to the ladder, but several barrels and crates had to be avoided before it could be reached.

Through a crack in the wall a tiny streak of light escaped.

Billy reached the door and listened.

Now and then he heard a sound like a rough outburst of laughter, muffled and indistinct, but that was all.

The cabin door and walls were evidently of thick material, for listening as intently as he could, he could only hear now and then, a rough guffaw of laughter, indicating that those within were in a merry mood.

One of the voices was that of Garth, the chief of the smugglers; the other party or parties were unknown to Billy, but he was certain of the cause of their joviality—it

could be nothing but the smooth way in which they had outwitted and captured the men of the "Watchdog."

Billy's ire rose as he mentally reviewed the events of the night; the miserable failure of the expedition which he had set out so proudly to lead to success; the cutter expectantly awaiting the return of her men with news of the capture of the outlaws while in fact the latter were the victors and laughing over it. But as these bitter thoughts rankled in his mind the sudden idea came to him that the tables might yet be turned on the smugglers before the morning. They would doubtless pass the night on the schooner. Having left the prisoners safely confined they would not be likely to leave any one to guard the house where they were and why could not he and Eb go back and release them, and returning to the schooner, capture both her and her crew?

He had noticed that the smugglers had left the island in their own boat: consequently the cutter's boat must be still at the island.

What had been done with the arms of the Revenue men he knew not—if they had been left at the house well and good: if not, it would not prevent them while Garth and his men were asleep, from securing them below decks and becoming masters of the vessel.

He determined to carry the plan out and hurried up on deck again, satisfied that he could learn nothing by waiting longer there.

It was still deserted.

He went ashore and found Eb and the dug-out where he had left them.

"Come, Eb, we must get out of this," he said as the mulatto started to express his pleasure that Billy had not been discovered, captured or shot in his venturesome visit to the schooner.

"Which way?" was all Eb said.

"On up. I know my bearings now. This channel connects with the lake where the island is. It winds around a good deal and the streams running into it are so narrow that a boat can't move through them. It's a longer route to the house, which explains why the gang came the other way. If I tried to go back the way we came I am afraid I'd get lost so we will go this way."

"But wha' yer goin' back fer?" queried Eb, much puzzled. "Reckon yer kin get dem fellers loose?"

"Yes," was all Billy said, as he grasped his paddle and the dug-out stole away, creeping close to the dark slumbering hull of the schooner and on up-stream.

When the schooner had been left well behind they moved into the center of the stream and then used their paddles to the utmost, for Billy had seen a way to vindicate himself in the eyes of the officer who had put such confidence in him but whose good opinion would be sure to be reversed were he acquainted with the disasters that had befallen the men when under Billy's charge.

The acquisition of the smuggler schooner, whose presence both he and the Revenue men were ignorant of, and which they would have known nothing about had the expedition as at first planned been successful, Billy reasoned would more than offset the discomfort which the blue-jackets had suffered at first.

With this ambition filling his breast his arms were tireless, but despite their best efforts (for Eb was working with all his strength) the clumsy dug-out seemed to make but poor time.

A wide stretch of water was seen branching off to the right, and into it the dug-out was turned, as Billy recognized it as one that connected directly with the stream down which they had first come.

This in fact was the place where the smugglers' boat had left the stream they had followed after leaving the island, and Billy had miscalculated and gone beyond.

"Put into it, Eb," said Billy. "It will be

morning now before we know it and we have got a good ways to go yet."

However it was yet several hours until morning but Eb exerted himself to the utmost as he was as anxious as his friend to reach the island.

"Stop paddling," ordered Billy, suddenly. "I hear voices!"

The boat was brought to a standstill in the shadow of the shore.

Yes, the silence brooding over the swamp was broken by voices now heard plainly and distinct, and in the direction from which they had come.

Louder and louder they grew, mingled with the rattling of oar-locks and the dipping of blades.

"It's some of the gang coming this way," said Billy. "It can't be that they have seen us and are after us."

Filled with apprehension they awaited the appearance of the boat.

Soon it came into sight, rushed into the stream where the dug-out was from its tributary, and under the sweep of eight pairs of oars, passed the spot with a rush.

The boat was well loaded; Captain Garth was sitting in the stern.

From their concealment the two in the dug-out watched the boat as it receded until it disappeared around a bend.

"Wha's that mean, Mars' Billy?" asked Eb, as usual depending on his white friend for the explanation of anything beyond his apprehension.

"Don't know; they are probably bound for the house on the island and that is enough to knock our little plan all to pieces," and somewhat discouraged at the unexpected and unfortunate turn affairs had taken, he relapsed into gloomy silence.

"Tain't no use ter try an' free dem fellers in der house now if dem scalawags is goin' dere. Wha' yer goin' ter do, Mars' Billy?"

"I don't know, I'm sure; stay here, I reckon, till I scrape enough wits together to see what to do. There is no use in tryin' to head off those fellows now—they have got the inside track. Blame the luck. Why couldn't they have stayed on the schooner, where they belonged? What do they want to go back to the island for, anyway? There don't seem anything for us to do, Eb, but own up beat, leave the boys in the hands of Garth and his men, leave the smugglers in possession of everything, and go back to the cutter and confess my failure and incompetence. I would rather be shot than face Captain Bronson after this, but he should know all."

Eb felt it was impossible for him to say anything to lessen the sorrow and chagrin of his friend, and he wisely remained silent, secretly glad that he was a "nigger," and therefore free from the vexations and disappointments attendant upon the ambitions that fill the hearts of the white race.

"They are coming back, Eb."

These words broke the long silence that followed Billy's former gloomy speech.

There were no voices now, but the clatter of oar-locks and the splashing of dipping oars was audible.

The sounds drew nearer, and shortly the boat appeared.

The moon was silvery bright now, no clouds dimming its light, and the boat and its occupants were plainly seen as they came on over the shining water.

"Look, Eb, look!" said Billy, in a hoarse, excited whisper. "That isn't the boat that went up. See. It is white. It is one of the cutter's boats. And the men. Look, Eb. They, too, belong to the cutter!"

There was no mistake. The familiar white shape of the cutter's boat was easily recognizable now, and the men wore the blue uniform of the cutter's crew.

"It's our boys, Eb," said Billy, squeezing the mulatto's hand in excess of joy. "Either they have escaped or the gang have

freed them—not likely the latter, though. They must have broken loose themselves, and perhaps now have Garth and his men confined in their places. We must join them."

There was no time to lose.

The dug-out was paddled out of the shadow and into the center of the stream, to intercept the advancing boat.

The dug-out was seen, for an order was heard, and the boat slowed up.

With oars "tossed" she glided smoothly on, while Billy and Eb waited for her to come alongside.

None of the men turned around—their backs remained toward the two in the dug-out.

As the boat slid up against the dug-out, one of the men leaned over and grasped Billy by the hand and pulled him over into the boat, and at the same time a man in the stern seized him by the arm and said, with a laugh:

"Glad to see you, youngster."

Billy uttered a cry of surprise and alarm, and tried to break away, but found he could not.

It was Captain Sam Garth who uttered the sneering words. Billy was in the hands of his enemies. He looked around. The dug-out was floating away. Ebony was nowhere in sight.

CHAPTER V.

THE SMUGGLER'S CLEVER RUSE.

It was folly to attempt to escape: the grip of the smuggler was like steel. Even could he have broken loose and leaped overboard he would have been at the mercy of the rifles of the gang.

Billy allowed Garth to pull him to a place between his knees. But he was far from being cowed and bit his lips to keep back a retort when the leader commented approvingly on his apparent subjection.

But he was disheartened, for his cherished plan to retrieve the fallen fortunes of the "Watchdog's" men, was now scattered beyond recovery.

What was to be the next move in the play he could not imagine and he wondered what would be done with himself.

"Where's the nigger?" demanded Garth.

"Dunno," replied one of the men. "He jist slid inter ther water, an' that was the last o' him. He must have come up in ther shadder out yander an' is likely ashore now."

"Don't like ther idee o' that nigger bein' roun' loose," said the leader. "I'll take this yere dug-out in tow so he can't git that."

"Ther po'r devil'll have er tough time of it all along by hisself in ther swamp an' no boat. Durned if I wouldn't hate ter be in any such er fix. He'll likely never get out alive."

"Let him die then," remarked Garth, coarsely, as he reached out and seized the rope that was tied to the bow of the dug-out, and the boat started away with the little craft in tow.

Garth giving Billy a savage pinch, asked:

"What was you fellers doin' in that thar dug-out an' how did yer happen ter find it, anyway?"

"We were trying to find out where you were going to," replied Billy honestly. "We knew where the dug-out was in the first place."

"An' yev been spyin' 'round here before, hev ye?"

"Exactly. I'm no friend of yours, Sam Garth," said Billy, "and nothing would suit me better than to see you in the grasp of the Revenue men."

"Is that er fact?" said the leader, with a sneering drawl. "An' how would yer like ter see Uncle Sam in the grip o' Captain Sam Garth?"

At this all the men laughed as though it was a huge joke.

Billy pondered over the words as he looked at the blue uniforms the men all wore, which they had taken from the prisoners. They had also appropriated the cutter's boat. There was an object in this. Was it possible the outlaws intended to impersonate the cutter's men, depend on the disguises to board the "Watchdog" unmolested and when once aboard take possession? They were well-armed and now outnumbered the men who had remained on the cutter.

Billy could hardly believe, however, that the smugglers, desperate as they were when cornered, would thus take the aggressive and dare attempt an outrage of that kind. Yet he knew Sam Garth was audacious enough to pause at nothing.

This indeed was the plan the reckless smuggler leader had determined to carry out.

The boat turned into the branch when that was reached and went swiftly on.

Garth, taking a handkerchief which was stuffed in one of the pockets of the suit he wore, tied it tightly over Billy's eyes.

"What's that for?" demanded Billy, though he knew well enough that it was to prevent him from seeing the schooner when they should pass the spot where she was lying.

"Never mind," was all the answer he received.

After awhile the boat stopped and he knew by the sounds that the smugglers were boarding the schooner.

Billy was not left alone in the boat—three or four others remained.

Billy's thoughts were many and all bitter. He wondered where his mulatto friend was and what he would do all alone in the swamp deprived of a boat. And too he wondered how the daring expedition of the smugglers would terminate, now that they had determined on a retaliatory move.

Before, Billy had indulged high hopes of being able to turn the tables on the outlaws but these hopes were now dead. The smugglers had already turned the tables on the cutter's men; they were preparing to score another victory and Billy, with all his quick wits, was impotent to prevent it.

"Wot's keepin' them fellers?" grumbled one of the men in the boat after considerable time had passed. "We've been layin' here fifteen minutes now."

This was a fact, but another fifteen minutes passed before those who left the boat returned to her.

"You kin set in ther bows, youngster," said Garth, grasping Billy by the arm. "I've got some use fer you there," and he chuckled.

Billy, still blindfolded, did as he was bid and the boat started away again.

On, on she went. Billy now had no knowledge of his surroundings.

"Here's ther Gulf at last," he finally heard some one say and so knew that the edge of the swamp had been reached.

"An' thar's somethin' else too, boys. Look behind you," broke in Garth somewhat excitedly.

They turned and looked back at the stream they had just left.

"It's er boat," exclaimed several at once.

Garth had noticed the dark spot that was now seen to be a boat, moving down the stream they had emerged from.

They all stared in wonder.

It was coming on rapidly. The oars could be seen, working like clock-work, their wet ends shining like silver in the moonbeams when they were lifted from the water.

"Who kin they be, boys?" spoke up one. "Cain't be them fellers on ther island hev escaped an' are makin' fer ther cutter?"

"That's what they are," declared Garth, with a curse. "That's our boat. I can tell it anywhere. How did they get away? Blast 'em. We'll nip their little scheme. They won't get aboard ther Watchdog

yet awhile. We'll fetch 'em ter terms as soon as they get in range. They hain't got any guns fer we took 'em away. They'll sneak back when we open up on 'em. By George, boys," slapping his knee with gusto, "I'm a-thinkin' a few shots fired at them fellers will help us along immensely in pullin' ther wool over ther eyes o' them chaps on ther cutter," and he laughed.

They ceased rowing and the boat was allowed to rock idly on the water while they waited for the other boat.

"They must see us now," muttered Garth, as the other boat, with oars rising and falling with quick precision, came pushing on straight for them.

"Bring her around," ordered Garth, in a low tone. "Starboard."

The boat forged around until she was broadside to the other.

"Now give 'em a volley."

The gang reached for their guns, directed them upon the other party and let fly a scattered fire.

What damage was caused was not seen then but it was plainly not enough to check the progress of the boat for it came right on.

"Give 'em another," ordered the smuggler leader.

A dozen rifles blazed out and as many bullets went whizzing at the rival boat.

Then the latter was seen to swerve sharply around. She was not over twenty yards away now and heavily loaded with men.

Hardly had she turned before a burst of fire leaped from her, lighting up the figures of her men and the waters around them with a lurid color, while the crash of the guns, the roar of which sounded as one, went booming along the edge of the forest and over the water.

Garth uttered an oath as he saw one of his men reel back and fall, and rising, said:

"At 'em, boys. Pour it into them red hot. We must beat them fellers back. Where in ther deuce did they get their guns?"

The smuggler gang, all armed with repeaters, now commenced a heavy fire on the other boat.

The others answered in the same way and a rapid but irregular fire was kept up on both sides as fast as the belligerents could load and fire.

For about five minutes this miniature naval battle continued, hot and heavy, and the air between the rival crafts was cut by scores of flying balls while the smoke drifted away to seaward.

Then suddenly the firing ceased on the part of the last comers, the boat was moved around and commenced to glide shoreward with increasing rapidity.

A yell of victory broke from the smugglers.

"Ther fight is won an' easy too, boys," he said. "I didn't think them fellers war lick-ed yet, in fact begun ter feel a leetle skeery fer us 'uns. But let 'em go. What do you think of it, youngster?" giving a playful poke with the muzzle of his rifle.

Billy bit his lips and did not answer. During the fight he had crouched down in the bow of the boat and protected himself in that way from the zipping bullets that flew dangerously near, sometimes striking the boat close to him but more often whistling by in the air overhead.

He had anticipated the defeat of the gang and his hopes had risen again, only to be once more shattered. He gazed angrily at the boat as it drew away toward the shore.

"On to the 'Watchdog!'"

The order came from Garth. The oars dropped into the water and the boat leaped ahead, making straight for the "Watchdog" lying sullenly silent about three hundred yards away, her dark hull looking grim and forlorn as she lay there alone in those deserted waters.

"Now see here, youngster," said Garth, leaning over to Billy, "let me give ye a word of advice. Do you see this?" shoving a gleaming revolver in his face. "If you open yer mouth when we get within hearin' distance I'll kill you deader'n Marc Antony. D'ye hear?"

But Billy made no reply and Garth took his position behind him, still holding to the revolver.

The boat was close upon the "Watchdog" now, and Garth ordered Billy to stand erect and face the vessel as they drew near.

Billy made no move to obey until the cold muzzle of the revolver pressed against the back of his neck, coupled with an angry threat from the smuggler leader, told him that his life would pay the forfeit should his obstinacy get the better of his judgment.

He knew he was to be used as a stool-pigeon to deceive his friends on the cutter and be the means of delivering them over to their enemies.

The officers on the cutter, seeing the boat approach with the men wearing the uniforms of the crew and with Billy among them, would never dream of danger, but would assist to aid them in boarding the vessel.

All this passed through Billy's mind. His pride had been humbled by the disasters which had befallen the expedition under his leadership, but to be used for the base purpose for which he was to be used was too much for the high-spirited fellow to bear.

The capture of the Revenue men in the swamp savored strongly of treachery on the part of some one connected with the attack: should he follow Garth's orders by showing himself and thus making the men aboard the cutter think all was right, there would be nothing wanting to prove him to be the traitor—it would be self-evident.

"I will never do it," he determined. "I will warn them in spite of Garth and his revolver. He will kill me for it but I will baffle him. He shall not have everything his own way. If it takes my life to save the Watchdog from falling into the hands of these scoundrels well and good. I ought to die after this miserable night's work."

They were close upon the cutter now.

The forms of several of her men could be seen on her decks.

The time had come for Billy to act.

With the strength of desperation he drove his heel into Garth's face and shouted out his warning to the cutter.

Before a shot could be fired he had plunged from the boat and disappeared under the waves close to the cutter.

CHAPTER VI.

BILLY TURNS EAVESDROPPER.

WHEN Billy's head again appeared above the surface of the water he was safe from the sight of the smugglers, for the hull of the "Watchdog" was between him and them.

He had dived under the cutter and come up on the other side.

He heard shots ring out from the decks of the cutter and answering reports from the boat. He knew by that that his warning had put the Revenue men on their guard.

He was confident that the latter would succeed in beating off their audacious assailants. He was certain he could keep afloat, providing no one came to his rescue, until Garth and his men were forced to retreat and he could be then aided aboard the cutter.

As he listened, however, he was forced to the conclusion that the desperate smugglers had obtained a foothold on the cutter's decks.

Shot after shot in quick succession told that hot a duel was being fought out there while hoots, yells, and cheers made an unearthly and strange din in that early morning hour on those desolate waters.

Through it all the cutter lay there in dogged silence, as if indifferent into whose hands the fortunes of the battle were to place her.

Suddenly the firing and the shouting ceased and a strange silence seized upon the ship.

Then Billy's heart sunk.

"Hooray, boys," he heard a voice cry which he well recognized. "We hev got 'em in spite o' that youngster's loud mouth. Blast him, where is he?"

Another crushing defeat the smugglers had scored against the Revenue men.

"I must be what sailors call a Jonah," muttered Billy, smothering a half sob, so bitter were his feelings. "Every move that has been made against Garth and his men since I have been aboard has resulted in disaster. If I manage to get aboard her now she will probably sink and carry the crew all down to death, while the smugglers will escape scot free, and so the climax will be capped. But I must get aboard nevertheless for I can't remain here much longer."

He found himself confronted by a problem he had not counted on.

He had anticipated the defeat of the smugglers and of being assisted aboard by the crew of the Watchdog. Now if he was seen and helped aboard it would be as a prisoner to his enemies. He had more cause than ever to dread falling into the hands of the smugglers, for though he had not heard Garth's threat to kill him, yet he knew the vindictive ruffian well enough to fear the worst if he fell again into his power.

"Lower a boat and hunt him up," he heard Garth order. "He's layin' round here in ther water somewhere if he hain't took a notion ter swim ashore. He can't get aboard that's sure."

"I'm afraid that's too true," thought Billy as he heard the last sentence. "What am I to do anyway?"

He was in a serious position and he knew it. It was too late to try to swim away from the ship and reach the shore. The boat had already started out to look him up and he would be seen without fail.

The smooth sides of the cutter afforded no hold for his hands.

Then he remembered that the captain's cabin was in the stern of the ship and that the windows—but they were far up beyond his reach.

But there was no other point that offered the least inducement and he commenced to swim around that way.

Reaching the stern he looked up at the cabin windows. They were far up out of his reach.

He heard the dipping of oars and slipped in under the counter where the shadow of the overhanging stern would fall upon him.

The cutter's boat, containing half a dozen men, came slowly along, the oars rising and falling in a leisurely manner.

Billy could see them turning their heads to the right and left and he pressed closer against the side of the vessel lest he should be seen.

But he was not, and the boat passed on to the waters further out.

As he watched the receding boat, growing dimmer in the hazy light that hung over the sea, he was startled at noticing a dark, perpendicular line between himself and the boat.

It was a rope reaching to the water, and suspended from one of the davits at the stern.

Then, looking up, he noticed that the boat usually hanging there was gone.

"At last," he thought joyfully. "Fortune has concluded to favor me. I wonder if this is a turning point? Anyhow I'll lose no time in taking advantage of it."

A deepening shadow was falling on the

sea as the reddening moon sunk lower and lower in the west.

Billy was glad of this for it would soon be daylight and if he was to succeed in slipping unobserved aboard the cutter it must be during the short darkness that preceded the dawn.

A couple of strokes brought him to the rope.

He tried it with his weight and then carefully pulled himself up hand over hand.

As he climbed higher he noticed that the cabin was dimly lighted.

Cautiously he continued to climb until he had reached the taffrail.

He peered over and then suddenly ducked his head.

Garth and two of his men were standing not over ten feet away.

"There's no show of slipping on deck," thought Billy. "Neither can I hang to this rope very long and I don't care about soaking in the water beneath—I'm soaked enough already. I don't see but what I'm in a fix. Ah, I have it. I will look to my first forlorn hope, the cabin windows. I am able now to use them after all for they are not beyond my reach now."

He had noticed that one of the large cabin windows was open, and he determined to try to get aboard the ship by this means.

He gave himself a slight swing, increasing it as he descended and succeeded in running his foot through the open window and holding it there.

Then, feet first, he began to edge himself in through the opening.

Once half way in the rest was easy.

But he was none too soon. The boat was returning and coming up rapidly off the quarter.

Billy was alarmed at this, fearing his body enframed in the lighted window would be seen, but the window was deep and the light within was not visible only almost dead astern.

"Ain't seen anything of him, eh?"

It was Garth's voice. He was leaning against the taffrail above.

"Nary a thing," was the answer.

"Blast that young imp. He's too much of a water-dog to drown and so he must have swum ashore during the first of the fuss. Well, drat him, he wants to keep outer my sight and claws."

The boat passed on and disappeared around the side—the search had been given up.

Billy had, before this time, forced himself in through the window and was standing on the floor of the cabin.

"What now?" he thought. "Here I am in the captain's cabin—sacred apartment—and what am I going to do about it?"

There was a berth on one side of the cabin and several chairs standing around. There was also a small table and two or three chests. The floor was carpeted.

Along one wall was a curtain of red cloth, behind which were hanging four or five suits of clothes as Billy discovered on examining. There were, too, a few blankets lying in a heap there.

"Now," thought he, "if I wanted to play the eavesdropper here's just the chance, but it would be fearful risky, for them fellows would peek in here out of curiosity and I'd be caught sure. Wonder if I had better do it? Garth will occupy this cabin to-night, of course, and he will likely turn in before long. He and his men will have to have some sleep for they have been up all night. By George, but this is a pretty fix for a Government vessel to be in. This is the cheekiest piece of business I ever heard of. What they will do with her now that they have got her is what gets me. One thing is certain though, and that is that I have got to decide mighty sudden now what I'm to do."

He was forced to decide sooner than he ex-

pected for just then he heard a step outside and the knob turn on the door.

He slipped behind the friendly curtain.

Through the open place where they were parted he saw Grath enter the room followed by another man.

"Well, I'll be dad bobbed," ejaculated the latter. "This hyar's a perty slick roost fer you, Sam. Beats yer cuddy-hole on ther schooner all holler."

"I reckon it does, Jim, but I don't guess I'll keep it long; too much like rich folks fer me," and he laughed.

"What are ye goin' ter do with ther vessel anyhow?" queried the other.

"I was just thinkin', Jim. I had it all fixed ter get rid o' them fellers we had penned up in the swamp and ther cutter at ther same time, but them fellers—gol darn it, Jim, it couldn't 'a' been them that follered us outer ther swamp. Them fellers we nabbed couldn't 'a' got hold o' any guns even if they could 'a' got away from the island. Them chaps that tackled us so big was all armed. Still it looked like our boat they had. Blamed if I know what ter think about it."

"My idee," said the man 'Jim,' "is that the fellers we roped in are still at ther island where we left them an' that them cusses we had ther fight with are another lot sent out by ther cutter ter find out what had become of ther first outfit. That's my idee."

"I reckon it's the right 'un, too, fer blamed if I can make myself believe that them chaps could 'a' got away from ther island, an' even if they did, as I said before, where could they have got the guns? I reckon you're right, Jim."

"And then if it is, what are you goin' ter do about it? We can't let them starve there, an' they'd eat us outer house an' home if we kep' 'em there an' fed 'em every day, besides ther trouble o' totin' 'em grub."

"I've got a scheme, Jim. It's devilishly cold blooded, but it'll rid us of them, an' that's what we want, an' before ther Government can send another vessel down in these waters, we will have the whole thing to ourselves, and do quite a little business. Listen an' I'll tell you."

Billy listened with all his ears for Garth's plans, for the future was just what he wished to know.

But as if to intentionally balk him, Garth dropped his voice to a whisper as he conversed rapidly with his friend.

His plan, whatever it was, was evidently a startling one, for his companion jumped from his chair as Garth finished, and said excitedly:

"Don't do it, Sam, don't do it. It's brutal, and cowardly. What? Send the whole outfit to the bottom? No, sir. I'm a perty tough one myself, but I'll never take a hand in any such a wholesale murdering scheme as that."

Billy shuddered at the words, and wondered if Garth was fiend enough to, actually desire to carry out such a devilish design.

Garth looked at the other uneasily. There was an evil glitter in his eyes: an ugly sneer on his lips.

"Ye'r a cad, Jim," he finally said, scowling. "What's ther use o' fiddlin' away sympathy fer these ere Revenue cattle? Ain't they watchin' an' workin' day an' night fer ter catch us fellers an' put us behind ther bars? Say, ain't they? An' wouldn't they shoot us like rats if we dared ter stand our ground? Of course they would, jest like they did ter-night. I hain't got any use fer 'em."

"They wouldn't kill us after we'd given up," replied the other, meaningly. "I know that. It's war between us an' ther Government, an' it's well enough ter shoot and put lead inter em when we happen ter meet an' get ter fightin', but when they surrender, I'm thinkin' they're entitled ter be treated like prisoners o' war. Yer scheme would be only worthy of savages, Sam."

"What would yer do about it, then?" asked Garth, with a snarl.

He was evidently in an ill mood, despite his victories over his enemies.

"Look yere: you want ter keep this vessel outer ther hands of ther Government an' make 'em think she went down, so we can have free sailin' fer awhile? Wal, ye kin do that without scuttlin' her, and kin have ther use of her fer ourselves besides. Listen ter my scheme. Take them fellers we've got on ther island an' fetch 'em here; run ther cutter out ter sea; put all her former crew in ther boats an' set 'em adrift. They'll reach ther coast all right after awhile. I know a place up ther coast where we kin run ther cutter inter ther swamp an' use her fer a storehouse. We kin take ther schooner out an' use whichever one we please. We kin afford ter give up ther old place on ther island, fer this will beat it all out. Of course it won't do ter hang around ther old ranch any more, fer them cusses will find it easy enough after this if they look it up. But how do yer like ther idee?"

"I reckon it's ther best o' ther two," he finally confessed. "Hanged if I don't believe I'll do as you say. Kin tell better when I've slept over it. Gosh, but I'm sleepy. Funny I never thought about tryin' ter capture this ship at ther time we roped in her crew on ther island. I never thought of it till we reached ther schooner. But as I jest now remember, I'm sleepy. Ain't had any sleep since night before last, an' I think we'd both better curl up an' snooze erwhile. You kin stretch out on ther floor an' I'll use ther bunk—I'm ther captain o' ther ship now, yer know," and he laughed softly, as though pleased at the situation. "Never thought I'd occupy ther cabin o' ther United States Revenue Cutter Watchdog. I war jest about ter turn in on ther schooner when Alex and Sid come an' warned us that we was ter be attacked. Them fellers didn't seem ter know whether we was goin' ter catch it at ther schooner or ther house on ther island, but it seems they only knew of ther house on ther island, an' I'm mighty glad they don't know anything about our leetle schooner lyin' in ther swamp. But if it hadn't been fer Alex and Sid, we'd all of us likely been prisoners on this vessel now instead of its masters."

"Yer bet," replied the other with emphatic roughness. "It's er mighty good thing ter have spies in ther enemy's camp."

"Good thing fer us," said Garth, with another soft laugh. "If it hadn't been fer them two spies o' mine aboard ther Watchdog we might be in ther fix yer jest spoke of."

Billy's heart gave a bound at these words. It was a revelation to him.

There were, then, traitors aboard the Watchdog—emissaries of the smuggler gang. This, then, explained why the Revenue men had been foiled so prettily at their own game. Somebody on the cutter had warned the outlaws of the attack and they had prepared for it. He, then, was not wholly to blame for the misfortunes that had been heaped upon him.

There was considerable pleasure to Billy in that thought—a straw for his shattered hopes to cling to: a theory to work upon with which to vindicate himself yet in the eyes of Captain Bronson.

As he was busy with these thoughts and thinking little of his own present position and his dangerous proximity to his deadly and brutal foe it was brought forcibly to his mind by a few more words that passed between Garth and his companion and which filled Billy with no small alarm for his own safety.

"Whar's my bed-clothes?" demanded the man Jim. "This floor looks kinder hard like. Ain't thar no blankets anywhere?"

"Look behind that curtain. Reckon you-

'll find somethin' o' ther kind stowed away there."

"I reckon he will, and something besides that he ain't looking for," thought poor Billy, a chill of dread creeping over him. "My jig's up."

The only blankets behind the curtain were a couple that he had thrown over himself.

CHAPTER VII.

SIGNALING THE SMUGGLER.

THERE was quite a space between the wall and the curtain and Billy slipped from under the blankets, rose erect and stepped behind a suit of clothes hanging there.

The man called "Jim" pulled the cloth rudely to one side and his glance falling on the blankets, said as he reached for them:

"Ye'r right, Sam. Here's just ther truck," and pulled them forth, allowing the curtain to fall again, to the inexpressible relief of the eavesdropper who was almost bursting with suppressed excitement.

"Gee-whiz," thought he. "What a narrow shave."

Though confident that the man would not return to the place, yet he hardly dared breathe for fear of betraying himself as he heard the man stepping around.

Then the light suddenly vanished and he heard "Jim" roll himself up in the blankets and all was still in the cabin.

Nevertheless, Billy did not move until the heavy breathing of the man on the floor assured him that he was safely asleep like the smuggler leader who was beginning to snore in his berth.

"Now is the time to move," thought Billy. "It will soon be light now and make it dangerous for me to be nosing around the ship unless everybody below is asleep like they ought to be."

Day had, in fact, already begun to break and the gray of morning dispelled the darkness of the cabin sufficiently for him to easily distinguish objects.

He removed his shoes and stepped cautiously from his concealment.

He stole noiselessly to the cabin door, silently turned the knob and with a last look at the sleeping outlaws, passed out.

But he was not out of danger by any means; he was liable at any moment to meet some of the smugglers who might be roving over the ship.

He had learned what he wished—what Captain Garth intended to do.

Garth intended to take the most of his men ashore and it was therefore wisest for Billy to wait until this was done and the ship nearly deserted before making the attempt to learn the location and condition of Captain Bronson and his men.

Besides Billy was sleepy himself and needed a rest.

He knew of a snug, dark corner on the ship where there was little likelihood of his being discovered, and groping his way to it, he laid down and was sound asleep in a few moments.

How long he slept he did not know, but he awoke undisturbed and refreshed.

"Now I've got to play the thief if I have any breakfast," he thought, and smiled grimly, "for I don't care to act the tramp and beg it. But first to see if the coast is clear. If it is I'll let the breakfast go for an hour or two and see if I can't get Captain Bronson and his luckless tars out of their fix. And if I can, then woe to Captain Sam Garth and his gang, for when they return they will meet a surprise party and find the tables turned on them at last and for good Cracky, but won't it be a great revenge to rope the rascals in and have them walk right into the trap, right into our hands without so much as asking them? Now, Billy, you've got a chance to clear your record. See that you don't botch the job but carry the thing out to the finish."

Billy arose and made his way forward. There was not a sound on board the vessel though it was broad daylight.

Arriving at a ladder that led above, he ascended and entered a cabin or deck-house. It was empty. Opening the door slightly he peered out on deck.

There was not a person on deck from his point of view.

Stepping boldly out he looked round the corner of the cabin.

Two men were lounging against the port bulwarks aft. They were the only persons in sight.

Billy glanced over the water in all directions. There was not a sail in sight. He gazed shoreward. There lay the matted swamp, a mass of luxuriant foliage and in its quiet and dark recesses Billy was confident Grath and his men were at that moment for the purpose of carrying out the plan decided on a few hours before.

How long had they been gone? Billy asked himself anxiously.

The sun told that noon was past. Perhaps Garth and his men had left several hours ago and would return before Billy could carry into effect his cherished scheme of releasing the cutter's men and entrap the smuggler gang.

The idea filled him with alarm.

He stepped into the deck-house and went below again.

His object now was to find where Captain Bronson and his men were.

He made his way to the engine-room. The place was deserted. He went into the boiler room and found steam at a low point and the fires.

He knew where the guard-room was and going to it shook the door gently and asked in a low tone, if any one was within.

There was no response. He looked into the other apartments—the steward's room, the mess-room, the gun-room; they were all silent and deserted.

"I'll try the big space in the bows they call the fore-castle," determined Billy. "If they are not there they must be stowed away down in the hold: a very dungeon of a place."

During his investigations he had had the entire vessel to himself, but he still retained his caution and glided along as noiselessly as a ghost, his eyes ever on the alert.

At last he reached the door to the fore-castle, unheard and unobserved.

The key was in the lock.

"He shook the door softly and asked: 'any one there?'"

"Oi think yes," replied a voice unmistakable Irish. "But moind ye we wouldn't be if we could get out of it."

Billy recognized the voice as that of a man belonging to the cutter's crew.

He turned the key in the lock and slipped into the fore-castle.

In bunks and hammocks a dozen or more men were lying, some of them asleep. Of those who were awake some turned their eyes indifferently at the new-comer while others looked at him decidedly suspiciously.

Billy was pained to notice that Captain Bronson was numbered among the latter.

"Oh captain," he said, stepping forward. "It was not wholly my fault—this miserable fix you are in. I can't explain it all now. But it can be made all right shortly now and inside of a few hours you can reverse things and have the smugglers confined here in your places."

"How do you happen to be loose aboard the cutter here while all the rest of us are confined here as prisoners?"

Captain Bronson was still suspicious.

"They don't know I am aboard," said Billy, hastening to explain all that happened since he leaped from the boat.

He added:

"I have come to free you," and threw the door wide open. "The smugglers are all

ashore with the exception of two or three on the upper deck. The Watchdog is again yours."

Captain Bronson looked at him steadily a moment and then said:

"I have wronged you, Billy, and you are true blue after all. But the way things turned out I could hardly help feeling as I did. Men, remove your shoes and follow me."

The disciplined crew obeyed and noiselessly, Captain Bronson leading the way, they filed out of the fore-castle. They followed Captain Bronson to the gun room where the arms and ammunition for the small-arms was kept.

Each man supplied himself with a carbine and a brace of revolvers.

Hardly as silently as they had entered the place—for the arms would creak—they started for the upper deck.

The cabin was reached on the upper deck. They filed out on the deck with ready guns.

The two smugglers left on the vessel were still standing by the bulwarks. They heard a sound and turned. Resistance was out of the question—a dozen guns were leveled at them.

"Take those men below," ordered Captain Bronson. He turned the vessel and crew over to one of the subordinate officers and ordered Billy to follow him to the cabin.

They reached it by the companionway leading from the deck.

"Now then," said Captain Bronson, as he seated himself and motioned for Billy to do likewise, "I want a report of everything that has occurred since you left the ship in charge of my men. I have heard nothing of them since they left. Why?"

Billy gave the details exactly as they had occurred and added:

"I learned by a bit of talk that passed between Garth and the other man here in the cabin last night, that the failure of the expedition and the surprise and capture of your men is owing to traitors in the service of Garth, or, as he puts it, 'spies in the camp of the enemy.'"

"It can't be possible," said the captain, looking keenly at Billy.

"I noticed," said Billy, "when I swam around to the stern here, that the boat usually hanging overhead, was gone and a rope reaching to the water from a davit above. If it hadn't been for the rope I could not have got aboard. I wondered at the time the reason of it. I see why it is now."

Captain Bronson had hurried to the cabin window, still open, and looked out and up.

"You are right," said he. "The boat is gone and the rope is still hanging here. We never missed the boat or any of the men. Can it be a fact there have actually been traitors aboard the cutter? Could it have been for the purpose of warning the smugglers of the attack and preparing for it, that the boat was taken? Yes, I am forced to believe it is the truth. I'll never rest until I have placed him, and when I do find him or them, whoever it may be—"

His eyes, blazing with anger, finished the sentence.

"I am sure such is the case now," said Billy. "Garth spoke of them as Alex and Sid."

"There are none of my men of that name as near as I can remember from a casual glance at the rolls," said the captain.

At this moment one of the officers stepped into the cabin with the announcement that Garth and his men had just appeared from the swamp and were pulling for the steamer.

"Is there more than one boat?" queried Captain Bronson.

"Only the one containing Garth and his men."

When the officers had left, Captain Bronson said:

"They evidently have not succeeded in bringing any of our boys away. I'd like to know what they are doing and where they are. That they got free we know."

Rising, he hurried up on deck, followed by Billy.

The blue-jackets were sitting on the decks now for the purpose of remaining from sight, all but two, who were officers, and with the caps of the common sailor upon their heads as a disguise, were posing as the two who had been left in charge of the vessel.

Captain Bronson took a good look at the approaching boat.

It was hardly two hundred yards from the shore and coming on in an easy and confident manner.

The captain's eyes snapped with anticipation as he watched the nearing boat, and then turned them on his blue-coated crew, "armed to the teeth" as the old saying is, waiting patiently for the prey so unsuspectingly approaching.

Once under the muzzles of those carbines and it would be surrender or death to Garth and his men, for the Revenue men were in a decidedly ugly mood.

"Just keep right on, Garth old fellow," thought Billy, elatedly, "and you will find yourself in a trap you can't get out—"

His words were cut short by a terrific roar from the forward part of the vessel, while a cloud of smoke rushed away from the bows and hung heavily over the water.

One of the ship's cannon had been discharged.

The boat came no nearer, but stopped, turned about and made back toward shore.

Could the firing of the gun have been a danger signal to them? If so who had fired it?

Captain Bronson looked his men over. All that had been confined with him in the fore-castle were there now on deck.

The two prisoners were securely fastened in the guard-room.

CHAPTER VIII.

A SPY ON BOARD.

CAPTAIN BRONSON looked around at his men in amazement and then at the boat that was now pulling back toward the swamp.

Then he stepped up to Billy and whispered:

"That firing was a signal to the smugglers. Can there be a spy hidden on board this ship? My men are all on deck here except the engineers and his assistants and the stokers who are getting up steam. I know the engineer too well to suspect him, and his assistants too."

Billy only shook his head.

Captain Bronson went below and down into the engine room to see the engineer. He inquired if any of the stokers had been absent from his post during the past few minutes.

They had not. The engineer himself had been with them for the last ten minutes while they had been arranging the fires.

Captain Bronson returned to the deck his brows knitted with perplexing thought.

He was confronted with a mystery. Some daring, cunning spy was in their midst and had for the second time, saved the smugglers from falling into his hands.

Some one from the cutter had taken the boat that hung over the stern and gone with it to warn the outlaws of the first attack. That boat had not returned and yet the spy whoever he was, was on board the ship.

Could he, or they, have returned with Garth and his men when they came in the disguise of the Revenue men and slipped aboard unobserved?

"I don't know what to think, Billy," said the captain, drawing the young fellow to one side and speaking in a confidential way not usual with officials in his position, but which Billy, owing to the knowledge which he possessed in regard to the smugglers, had been treated with since he had been aboard.

"This spy was not with the party you took out, of course. He either came back with Garth and his men and slipped aboard unobserved by us or returned in the night alone. It may be that we have had this spy hidden aboard the ship ever since we left port. This last performance of his was forced upon him by the critical position he saw Garth and his men were in. He must be found."

Men were detailed to search the ship.

Two of the crew on deck exchanged knowing looks at the order and smiled slightly but no one noticed it.

The next three or four hours were spent in giving the vessel a thorough search and there was not a place large enough to conceal a man's body that was not looked into.

But the mysterious spy was not found. Captain Bronson could not conceal his chagrin and returned to his cabin.

Billy knew nothing more could be done until night. He had suggested a plan to Captain Bronson which the latter had concluded to be a good one. The cutter was to be run into an inlet some miles up the coast and the outlaws operated against from that point.

Darkness settled down at last and the order came for the cutter to move, and, without a light to betray her presence, she steamed slowly away.

Billy was at the wheel.

The start had been so timed that she would arrive at her destination about moonrise.

Billy watched the coast keenly as the big red ball rose out of the east. Finally he gave the order to slow up and the cutter moved in toward shore.

Slower and slower she went as she steamed into a little inlet and then stopped.

"Here we are," muttered Billy.

It was not yet midnight and Captain Bronson was anxious to accomplish something before daybreak.

In that secluded spot there was no danger of the vessel being discovered by her enemies and but two men were left on the vessel except the engineer and his men.

The others, a dozen or fifteen, fully armed, left the cutter in one of the long boats and with Billy in the steersman's seat, swept into the swamp.

There was plenty of room to swing the oars as the waterways here were wide and the boat plowed on at a good pace. The men could not but wonder how anyone could keep his bearings in that tangled swamp and network of streams where a straight course was impossible as they were forced to twist about to avoid the islands that dotted the place.

But though lost themselves they had full confidence in the young leader.

"Slow, boys," cautioned Billy at last. "Here's the island where your mates were roped in."

The boat ran up against the bank at the same spot where the other boat had stopped the night before.

Carefully they approached the house.

There was no light visible about the barn-like structure now—it was dark and seemed deserted.

It was deserted as they found on stepping in over the fallen door.

The rays of a bull's-eye lantern were turned about the room.

Billy, noticing the lamp still standing on the table, lighted it.

There was nothing to be seen of the accouterments which the Revenue men had cast on the floor the previous night. The

doors to the rooms where they had been confined, were open.

"Our boys are not here," said Billy. "I wonder where they can be anyhow? If it wasn't that I am certain it was them that attacked Garth and his men last night I would think they had been taken away and confined elsewhere to prevent their being rescued. But it's the schooner we want to find now. That is where Garth and his men probably are at this minute."

"Return to the boat then," ordered Captain Bronson.

A few minutes later the boat left the island and moved away up the stream on which Billy and Eb had followed the smuggler gang.

Billy had often wondered since his parting with Eb, where the faithful mulatto was, and what had befallen him.

Upon the broad, moonlit stream the oarsmen could work to good advantage and the boat fairly shot along until they came within a few hundred yards of the spot where the schooner had been moored.

Then again Billy cautioned them to go slowly and with caution, while he steered the boat over into the shadow of the trees along the bank.

Soon after the boat was stopped.

By points and peculiarities about the location which Billy had previously taken note of, he knew the spot had been reached close to which the schooner had been moored.

The men went ashore and stole cautiously through the woods, pausing at last on the edge of the bank against which the vessel had been lying.

The schooner was not there.

Billy looked again at the surroundings to see if he might not possibly be mistaken.

A careful scrutiny assured him that he was not.

But the schooner was gone.

CHAPTER IX.

SLIPPED OUT OF THEIR CLUTCHES.

"WHAT does this mean, Billy?" said Captain Bronson. "The schooner is not here."

"So I notice," replied Billy, rubbing his head in a puzzled way. "They must have concluded to pull out, thinking best to abandon the situation. Have probably slid out to sea under the cover of darkness and are now under sail on open water."

"Humph," muttered the captain. "Are we to be balked at every turn? They cannot get out without the help of the tide and it just turned a short time ago. Perhaps it is not too late to overhaul them. Back to the boat."

Just then he countermanded the order for Billy had seized his arm and whispered:

"Hear that? We have got neighbors near!"

Captain Bronson had also heard it at the same time—a sound rising out of the woods back from the shore; a sound like a rough outburst of laughter.

"Who can it be?" queried the captain, "in these lonely woods at this time of night. There is some one close by. Let us investigate."

The darkness was intense and as they entered the thicket it was impossible to distinguish one from the other.

To avoid getting lost in the gloom they took hold of hands and followed single file after Billy who moved ahead, feeling a way for them.

At times so tangled was the course of their march with matted vines that it was only by the indomitable will of the leader that they advanced at all.

At last the bright light of a fire was seen between a thick screen of trees and vines.

Cautiously they advanced until they reach-

ed a point where they could see without being observed.

In the center of an open spot in the heavy woods a big camp-fire was burning, round which a dozen men were gathered, laughing, talking and smoking.

Several were prostrate on the ground, presumably asleep.

"Now look a yere," growled one of the latter, turning over and half rising. "I want you fellers ter quit yer card-playin' an' turn in an' go ter sleep. D'ye hear?"

It was Garth himself who gave this peremptory order.

"All right, Sam," remarked one of the players as he shoved the cards in his pocket.

But instead of "turning in" they remained at the fire smoking and chatting in a low tone.

"If them chaps would only go to sleep," whispered Captain Bronson, to Billy, "we could capture the whole crowd, but if we try to get close enough now to use our guns we would be heard and discovered. We will have to let them alone for this time. Return to the boat."

Under Billy's leadership they managed to reach their starting point without any mishaps except a few bruises.

"Billy," said Captain Bronson, when the men had taken their places at the oars, "where do you suppose that schooner can be? Can she be lying in the neighborhood here? If so why are not Garth and his men aboard her? I fully expected them fellows were our boys. What can be the reason the smugglers are camping there in the woods?"

"Perhaps," offered Billy, "that our boys have got hold of the schooner, and the gang, now devoid of any vessel, and afraid to camp on the island where we went last night, have been forced to take to the open air."

"Maybe you are right," replied Captain Bronson. "I wish I knew. I think the best plan now is to push on down toward the coast and see if we can find anything of the lost vessel."

The boat was pushed off and stole quietly away from the shore.

When far enough away from the island the men bent to their work and a steady fountain spouted from the cutwater.

"There she is!"

The words, coming from Billy's lips, sent a thrill through the men.

He had taken no pains to speak low: on the contrary spoke louder than usual, for Garth and his gang were far out of hearing and he was perfectly willing that the Revenue men—whom he now believed to be in possession of the schooner—should hear him.

The dim shape of the schooner grew more distinct and less ghostly as the boat swiftly drew up.

Her position, however, puzzled them not a little.

She was laying with her bows against the bank of the stream with her stern reaching out to the middle of the channel.

"She seems to be aground," said Billy and he called out:

"Hello, the schooner!"

No response.

The blue-jackets ceased rowing and the boat glided up alongside.

A rope with a grappling-iron was cast over the side and one by one the men climbed aboard the vessel.

There was not a light on or about the ship.

The hatch over the forecabin was raised and the rays of the bull's-eye turned into it. It was empty.

Billy took the lantern and led the captain aft and together they went below.

The door to the cabin at the stern stood partly open.

They entered.

The cabin had no occupants but themselves.

"Well, Billy," said Captain Bronson, looking around, "we seem to have the entire craft to ourselves. What do you suppose it means?"

"Give it up," replied Billy, dropping into a chair. "There is one thing sure enough, though, and that is that you are at last in possession of Sam Garth's smuggler schooner."

"Yes," replied the other, "and I will try and see that he does not get her back again. But I cannot understand why she is abandoned. I cannot understand why Garth and his gang are camping in the woods when they might be aboard this vessel. It seems to explode your idea that our men had obtained possession of her."

"Yes," said Billy, looking puzzled. "They would not leave her to go wandering round the swamp in an open boat. If our men had been aboard and the gang had forced them to leave they would have taken possession. When we discovered the gang there in the woods I fully expected to find our boys on board the schooner, if we found the schooner at all. It's rather strange."

"Well, I don't know," acknowledged the captain. "Her position bears witness that she might have floated away and become grounded."

"If that's so, perhaps our boys are prisoners below now."

Captain Bronson caught at the idea, and grasping the lantern he left the cabin and hurried to look into the hold.

But there was nothing there except a very strong scent of tobacco.

"They are not aboard, Billy," said he, as he returned to the cabin. "Now I will have to own up beat. Where those fellows are and why this vessel is lying here abandoned is more than I can guess."

"But you have the vessel," said Billy, smiling, his remark being uttered to lessen the disgust that was plainly depicted on the other's face.

"Yes, and as I said before, will hold to it. Let me see," pulling out his watch, "it is one-thirty. Billy, I believe I will commence operations against the smugglers now."

"How?" queried Billy, in surprise.

"They must be all asleep by this time. There is nothing to prevent my men going back there and making them all prisoners as they lay asleep, is there?"

"Nothing," replied Billy, grasping the idea. "It is a good scheme. If we can capture the schooner and the outlaws all in one night it will be a good night's work."

"There is nothing to prevent it as I can see," said the captain. "I will rouse the boys up and we will start out at once."

Captain Bronson was a man of energy who never spared his personal pains in carrying out an object, and he hurried himself into the fore-castle where the men had gone to spend the night.

He had them all awake and attention almost immediately. They armed themselves and hurried up on deck.

Captain Bronson paused and after a surprised stare, said to one of the officers at his side:

"The watch. Where are they?"

The moonlight, falling full upon the deck, made every part that was not hidden in shadow, to stand out as distinctly almost as in daylight.

The two men stationed on deck to watch, were nowhere visible.

Somewhat startled at this Captain Bronson hurried forward.

He had not proceeded far before he stumbled over something lying in the shadow of the cabin amidship, and fell to the deck.

Rising hastily, he ordered the men up.

The light of the lantern was turned into the darkness and the object that had ob-

structed the captain's progress was made known.

There lay the bodies of two men who had been stationed on deck to watch.

Not a sound did they utter nor did they move, but fear that they were dead was removed on a closer examination, for it was seen that the men were bound and gagged.

Their bonds were quickly loosed.

"What does this mean?" demanded Captain Bronson. "Who did this?"

"Two traitors in your crew," replied one. "Jack Fyler and John Hurst were the parties. They came on deck a short time ago. Of course we thought nothing about that and the first thing we knew we were knocked down and then jumped on and bound and gagged! Them fellers haven't showed up since."

Captain Bronson seized the lantern and went to the bows, where he turned its light on the waters below where they had left the boat when they came aboard.

As he expected, the boat was gone.

He looked about the schooner.

There was not another boat about the vessel.

"Billy, your suspicions of there being traitors in our midst is proven at last," said Captain Bronson, bitterly. "It was they who frustrated our first attempt to capture the smugglers—they who saved them when they were about to fall into our hands the second time and now this is their third move against us and once more they set my plans at naught. Everything is in their hands now. We cannot leave this vessel because we have no boat—we are virtually prisoners, and what is worse the schooner is fast aground, and while we are forced to remain here helpless those two scoundrels can row to the place where Garth and his men are, take them on and pull to the steamer and take easy possession. The devil is taking care of those fellows, seems to me."

Captain Bronson was exasperated beyond measure to realize that for the third time the wily foe had neatly slipped out of his clutches when almost within his grasp.

But greater than this was his trembling fear for his ship. He readily saw the object of this last move—the confiscation of the Watchdog, and with the traitor blue-jackets to guide the outlaws to where the vessel was lying defenseless it would be an easy matter to accomplish it, and Captain Bronson and his men enchained to the grounded schooner, would be impotent to prevent it.

CHAPTER X.

THE SMUGGLER CHIEF IN CHARGE AGAIN.

WHEN Sam Garth and his men pulled away from the cutter they had captured, they little suspected that Billy Brine, their plucky young antagonist, was concealed aboard for the purpose of returning the ship to her rightful crew.

But there were many surprises in store for Garth and his men.

Their first surprise was when they came in sight of their schooner as they were pulling up the water-course that led to the island where they had imprisoned the Revenue men the night before.

The vessel was lying right where she had been left, but they were amazed to see three or four figures standing upon the decks. Moreover the figures were armed.

"Furies," cried Garth, ordering his men to cease rowing, and pointing ahead. Those blasted blue-coats have slipped out of their cage in some way an' got a hold of our schooner. Here's a pretty howdy-do."

His men looked around. They saw the men on the schooner, now reinforced by a dozen more that came hurrying up from somewhere.

That they were the men they had expected to find at the island there was no doubt. The

long boat the gang had left at the island, was floating by the schooner's side, but the term "blue-coats" would hardly apply to the men now as they were arrayed in the motley garments which had been forced upon them in exchange for their uniforms.

The boat stopped. The outlaws were face to face with their first set-back.

Heretofore in their campaign against their rivals, their every move had been successful and followed by the defeat and discomfiture of the Revenue men, and their confidence in their reckless leader had risen until they deemed him capable of circumventing the enemy in an emergency.

But Garth showed no evidence of being equal to the present problem: he uttered no words but deep curses, which he kept up continually as he glared at the men on the schooner.

"Come on, gentlemen, come on," called out a voice from the latter. "Come up closer. We've got some old clothes we want to trade."

The men in the boat were too angry to reply.

With a scowling face, Garth ordered the boat about.

"We'll have to go back to the Watchdog without 'em," he said. "This is the deuce of a fix. It's er good exchange though, fer ther cutter," and he laughed a little. "If ther water was deep enough I'd fetch ther cutter in an' bring them rascals ter terms in er jiffy. As it is I'll see that they don't put out ter sea in her. They may not know ther Watchdog is in my hands, an' if they run ther schooner inter the gulf I kin bring 'em ter order mighty suddint."

The boat was moving rapidly toward open water which was soon reached.

The "Watchdog" still lay there, silent and seemingly abandoned: no living person to be seen on her—no smoke issuing from her smokestack.

But suddenly a burst of flame and a cloud of white smoke shot out from her bows and a heavy boom went rumbling over the water.

Garth sprung half erect with an ejaculation of rage and astonishment.

"Stop rowing," he ordered. "It won't do ter go any nearer. Boys, there's somethin' wrong. I've got a couple o' spies aboard that ship. I ordered them ter discharge er gun if by any chance ther prisoners regained their liberty an' ther possession of the ship. That's what's happened or they couldn't have fired that gun fer they were locked up with ther rest o' ther Revenue chaps when I left. Furies, everything is goin' against us. Back to ther swamp an' we'll try ter get our schooner back anyhow. An' we kin do it, too," assuming a confidence he did not feel. "We kin keep ther boat outer sight an' slip up ter ther island ag'in' which ther schooner is tied, an' make er rush an' git her inter our hands ag'in before them cusses knows it."

This plan was carried out, and the boat, keeping clear of the schooner, crept up to the island where she was lying moored, by another route.

The gang then landed.

They were desperate, and determined to regain possession of the schooner at any hazard.

Their plan might have been successful so determinedly was it prosecuted, had not some of the men on the schooner who had gone into the cabin amidship to lounge and smoke and escape the rays of the afternoon sun that was beaming down fiercely upon the deck, seen, through the windows, Garth and his men as they stole out of the thick woods. Seeing the deck deserted and no one in sight he and his men anticipated an easy victory.

But just as they were about to leap upon the deck the Revenue men rushed from the cabin, guns in hand.

They opened a hasty and rather haphazard fire on the smugglers that caused them to

hurriedly conceal themselves in the timber again with the exception of one unfortunate who was killed at the first fire.

Garth was furious at this decisive defeat.

"Wait till ter-night, boys," said he, "an' we'll have 'em. We'll get aboard in ther dark. We'll camp in ther open space here in ther woods till then. We can't go aboard now without gettin' shot all ter pieces, 'cause we'd have ter fight our way through all them pesky vines an' underbrush before we could reach ther schooner. But I'll have it ter-night, if it takes ther last man of us."

So the discomfited and angry crowd repaired to the open spot to wait for night to give them another chance to drive a blow at their enemies.

The leader, engrossed with his own unpleasant thoughts, remained silent and morose. Somewhat superstitious, he could not rid himself of the idea that the tide had turned against him, and he was alarmed with the fear that the worst was yet to come.

And his fears were well grounded.

Before sundown, one of his men, who had been on a little scouting expedition by himself, returned to his mates with the startling information that the schooner was not at her moorings, and furthermore was nowhere in sight.

The men looked at each other in amazement. Garth was speechless for a moment, and then cried:

"To ther boat. We will overhaul them fellers and take that vessel away from 'em or kill ther last one o' 'em. They're tryin' ter run out of ther swamp an' make fer ther cutter, but we'll catch 'em. Quick, now. If they get inter open water, they are beyond our reach."

The gang seized their guns and made a rush for the side of the island where they had landed.

"The boat!" roared Garth, glaring about him like a madman. "Whar's ther boat?"

"Yes, where is it?" queried one of the men.

The boat was gone.

Part of the rope by which it had been tied was still fastened to a tree, one end hanging in the water.

"See," said one of the men, holding it up, "it has been cut."

The rope had been smoothly severed with a knife.

Garth broke out with a string of fearful invectives that startled even the hardened men around him.

Disasters to the smugglers' cause had followed each other fast during the past few hours—this one capped the climax. A few hours before, and the enemy and their armed vessel were in their power, but the fortunes of war had turned against them with a suddenness that was crushing. In a few short hours they had not only lost possession of their prize, but their own vessel was in the hands of the enemy, and now their only means of leaving the island was taken from them, and they were prisoners in the swamp, without a roof to cover them.

Their position was now critical.

"Boys," said Garth, "this is perty tough. I swear I dunno what ter do."

The men were downhearted. Deprived of their only means of leaving the island, starvation stared them in the face.

"We will pass the night here anyhow," said their leader. "It's ther only thing we kin do, I reckon. When ter-morrer comes, we'll see what we kin do."

They built a fire in the open spot to drive away the chill and dampness that settled over the swamp after dark.

Hour after hour passed and after awhile they laid down on the damp ground to sleep the miserable hours away if they could, until daylight came, when they could devise means of some kind to leave the place and go to the cabin on the island fur-

ther up, where a quantity of provisions were stored.

But Garth deemed their present position, bad as it was, better than to be prisoners in the hands of the Revenue men, and fearing that they might return and capture him the wily leader had placed two men on the edges of the island to watch.

It was a lonesome time the sentinels had keeping their vigil there in that desolate swamp.

It was about an hour after midnight and the moon had cleared the treetops when one of the sentinels grasped the other by the arm and pointed toward the south.

On the shimmering surface of the water a moving object of some sort was dimly seen. It was drawing nearer.

"What is it, Bill?" asked one to the other, lowering his gun which he had raised as if with the intention of firing. "Thunder, it's er boat, an' comin' this-away, but thar's only two men in it as I kin see."

"Watch an' see what they're up to."

With a steady movement the boat advanced.

"Halt!"

One of the watchmen brought his gun to his shoulder while his companion did the same, ready to fire if the order was disregarded.

The moonlight fell full upon the boat and its occupants.

The oars churned she water as they were backed and the boat came to a stop.

"Who are you an' what do yer want?" demanded one of the sentinels.

"We want ter speak ter Captain Sam Garth," was the answer, "and we reckon you're one o' ther gang."

"I reckon we is," came out of the darkness where the two men were concealed.

The loud hail of the watch had roused Garth, sleeping uneasily, and while the above conversation was in progress he came on the scene.

"That you, Alex and Sid?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Ye'r just in time. I've been rackin' my brains all ter pieces tryin' ter find out how we was goin' ter get away from this cussed island without swimmin'. You fellers fired ther gun on ther cutter?"

"Yes. We found they was goin' ter lay fer ye an' watched our chance an' slipped down on the lower deck where the gun is an' fixed a slow fuse to the machine an' went on deck again. We timed it just right, an' nobody suspected we had anything ter do with it. It war fun ter see the fools search ther ship after the spy they thought was hidin' on board."

"An' how did them blue-jackets I fastened up in ther fore-castle manage ter get loose?"

"That young Billy Brine was stowed away on board an' set 'em free."

Garth uttered half a dozen strong oaths.

"Blast him. So he's ther cause o' all this is he? I'll shoot him if ever I set eyes on him again. An' did yer know them fellers we had penned up at ther island had got away too an' wuss'n that, got a hold o' our schooner an' have stuck to it as tight as though they owned it?"

"Yes, we know all that, or rather we sorter suspected it. But they ain't on ther schooner. She's layin' aground down here a ways. Reckon when they found they couldn't bulge her they pulled out to ther steamer an' let ther schooner go to ther dogs. We came right from ther schooner. Captain Bronson an' his men are aboard her now. They was right in yer camp onst ter-night an' was comin' ag'in when ye was all asleep ter rope ye in an' capture the hull caboodle. They won't do it now though; we took away ther only boat they had," and he laughed.

It had to be explained to Garth why Captain Bronson and his men were in the swamp and happened to be on the schooner.

"Ther other crowd that escaped from ther island ain't on board ther cutter at all, fer ther cutter has moved up the coast an' is hidden in er cove an' them fellers don't know no more whar she is than ther man in ther moon. They are on a wild-goose chase in ther dark, po'r devils," and he laughed heartily. "Captain Bronson and his men found ther schooner by chance and concluded ter keep her. See?"

"An' he was comin' ter make me a visit, was he?" said Garth. "We'll jest go down an' make him a visit, durn him, an' won't lose much time about it either. Pull yer boat ashore an' let us aboard."

Garth was eager to strike back again at his hated foes now that the opportunity was offered.

"Not so fast," said one of the men, as he started to obey the order. "How would you like to have the cutter in your hands again?"

"Can it be done?" asked Garth, eagerly.

"Easy as pie. Half her men are tied up on ther schooner an' ther other half are nosin' round in ther dark with no more of an idea where she is than er Chinaman has about ther Bible. I know just where she is; she's layin' at anchor not over three miles from here an' if you say so you can be in command again in less'n an hour an' finish yer night's rest in Captain Bronson's private cabin. That's a little better'n laying on damp ground outdoors I'm a thinkin'."

"Boys, ye'r dandies," said Garth. "Well do it. Ter-morrer we'll get ther schooner back or kill every last one o' them skunks that has stolen her."

By this time all the men had gathered round.

The boat was plenty large enough to hold them and in a few minutes they had seated themselves in it and seized the oars which had been brought along with it. Shortly they were pulling swiftly away from the island.

"There she is, boys!"

After a half-hour's pull through the tangled swamp, these words came from one of the renegade revenue men.

The inlet had been reached on the coast wherein the "Watchdog" was sleeping peacefully at her anchorage.

Silently as the tomb she lay there.

"The watch will see us of course," said the man Alex, as the boat moved out straight for the cutter, "but we are all blue-jackets and in the cutter's boat (Garth and his men still wore the clothes of the men they had captured) and I think our little scheme will work as smooth as grease," and he laughed.

As the boat drew up, the forms of the watch were seen in the bright moonlight, standing on the cutter's deck.

The smugglers crept up close to their prey without a challenge or a question.

As they came alongside a ladder was lowered for them, and, inwardly chuckling at the way things were going, Garth led his men up to the deck.

Even then the smugglers were not challenged or molested. They were not recognized or paid any attention to. The watch was walking slowly away toward the bows.

Garth grasped the hands of his spies who had served him so well and shook them warmly.

Without a finger having been raised to resist them, he and his victorious gang were once more in possession of the United States Revenue Cutter "Watchdog."

CHAPTER XI.

EB TAKES A HAND.

LET us see what has become of Ebony and follow his adventures, for the young mulatto was by no means an unimportant factor in the campaign against the smugglers.

We left him when his white companion had fallen into the hands of Garth and his men, through Billy's error in supposing they were the Revenue men escaped from their prison on the island.

It was not until Billy was seized that Eb saw that something was wrong.

Before any one could suspect his purpose he had slipped into the water and kept under the surface until he had swam into water that was shaded by the trees on the bank.

There he could raise his head above the water without any danger of his black skin and hair betraying him.

No search was made for him but he did not move until the boat was out of sight.

With a last rueful look in that direction, he climbed ashore and shook himself.

"I knows what dem fellers is up ter," he muttered as he looked in the direction in which the boat had vanished. "Dey are goin' ter 'tack der cutter an' I'll be dab bobbed if I don't believe dey'll get it too. Dey look fer all de worl' like reg'lar Revenue men. Won'er what I kin do about it anyhow? Golly, I jes' know. I'll go down ter der island an' set dem fellers free er dieer-tryin'. 'Tain't fur an' water won't hurt me."

Eb knew that the island where the prisoners were confined was not a quarter of a mile away, but one not animated with an invincible purpose would have shrunk appalled when faced with the task of reaching it, for it was necessary to swim through stagnant water, tramp through slimy ooze, stirring up snakes and alligators; climb muddy banks and force one's way in the dark among tangled trees, clinging vines and rank underbrush until compelled to take to the water again.

But this was what the plucky fellow did.

The mulatto had pushed his way along with the energy of a young giant, so great was his anxiety to reach the island, and when at last he arrived at its shores he was in an almost exhausted condition.

But he did not rest. He hurried up through the timber to the house, and entering, felt his way to the table on which he had noticed some matches when he made his first visit to the place where the blue-jackets had been so decidedly handicapped.

The matches were still there and he lighted the lamp.

Two heavy bars across the doors that connected with the other two rooms bore witness as to the prisoners' place of confinement.

"You dar, boys?" he said. "I guess yo' is, 'cause I hears ye. De dickens is inter everythin' we does ter-night, 'pears ter me, but I'se goin' ter git ye out o' dar er bu'st."

"It's ther nigger," said several voices at once, and a half-dozen added encouragingly: "Go it, blackey. Get us out o' here and we'll give ye all the terbaccy you can chew in er month."

Eb grinned at this but looked sober as he said:

"I wants ter get ye outer dar bad enough, fer Mars' Billy has got inter der hands o' that rascal, Garth, an' der cutter will, too, if I don't get ye outer dar an' we get er move on us almighty sudden," and he told them all that had happened while he worked away at the bars that had been tightly jammed in their places.

"Well, hurry up an' get us out o' here an' we'll put out after them chaps like a pack o' hornets. We've got a score ter settle with them now, and if we get a crack at 'em they'll come to terms pretty quick or somebody will get shot. But, say, nigger, are our guns out there?"

"No," replied Eb. "They took 'em along with 'em."

"The deuce," said the voice, with a muttered imprecation. "We might as well stay here, then."

"I kin get ye some mo'," said Eb. "Dar, durn ye!" addressing the bar, that had now become loosened, "come down."

In another moment he had both doors open, and the men filed out.

Eb showed his teeth in a big grin as they appeared, but it was as much on account of the ridiculous figure they cut in the rough and torn garments of the smugglers as from pleasure at seeing them free again.

"What did ye say about gettin' our traps fer us?" asked one.

"Follow me, gemmen," was all Eb said and hurried out of the room, followed by the others.

He was confident of finding the smugglers' boat near where the Revenue men had landed, and was not mistaken.

They lost no time in getting under way, and under Eb's guidance bent down to their work in good shape.

On the way Eb acquainted them with the fact of the smugglers having a schooner tied up in the swamp, and that he supposed the arms belonging to the Revenue men had been carried there.

When the schooner was reached she was boarded by the ex-prisoners, who, by the way, would never have discovered her had not Eb drawn particular attention to her, so well concealed was her black hull by the dark, timber-grown bank against which she was lying.

A hasty search was made of the vessel and the accouterments of the men were found lying on the floor of one of the cabins where they had been carelessly dumped.

Once more they took to the boat, fully armed now and confident accordingly.

"I'm afraid we are too late," said one of the men, as the minutes passed and nothing was seen of the enemy.

As the reader knows, it was not until open water had been reached that the other boat was sighted.

Had not the outlaws delayed so long at the schooner they would not have been sighted at all by the pursuers.

Without a moment's hesitation, the ex-prisoners, burning for revenge, opened a hot fire on their late captors, a fire that was as hotly returned.

The desperate outlaws, excellent marksmen all of them, used their arms with such effect that the attacking party did not dare press them too closely.

Then, while the thickest of the firing was in progress, the Revenue men made the discovery that their ammunition was exhausted. Filled with the excitement of the battle, they had used all their powder and shot before they were aware, and the word was given to retreat to the swamp.

The smugglers' boat was directly between them and the "Watchdog" and it was therefore impossible to reach the cutter and save it from falling into the hands of Garth and his gang.

Bitterly as they regretted it, they were forced to give up the fight and see the daring outlaws pull serenely out to take possession of their unsuspecting victim.

"Well, boys," said one of the men in the boat, "those rascals have got everything their own way to-night, but maybe our time will come yet. We'll see what we can do to-morrow. Of course they know we escaped but don't know we have discovered their vessel. We will go back and take possession and perhaps to-morrow they will return and come aboard and then we will lay for them and rake in the whole outfit."

Though the anticipation of this occurring—which was probable enough—cheered them some, yet they were terribly disheartened by the failure to check Garth and his men and save the cutter. They had not only failed to capture him and his men as they had expected, but had not even succeeded in giving their friends on the "Watchdog" a hint of danger, and they all felt a kind of prophetic

conviction that the daring smugglers would succeed in their ruse.

The schooner reached, they went aboard.

Eb changed his garments, which were now a mass of ill-smelling mud, for a clean suit he had found in a chest, and fatigued with his night's work he stretched himself out in one of the bunks in the fore-castle and fell into a delicious slumber, forgetting the trials and fatigues he had undergone and careless of what adventures the morrow might bring forth.

CHAPTER XII.

THE SCHOONER IS ABANDONED.

EB and his friends were confident that the outlaws would return to the schooner the following day.

The hours of the morning passed and the smugglers did not appear.

"I reckon they've got ther cutter in their hands all right enough," remarked one of the men, resignedly, "else they'd have been here before this."

The day passed on and still the enemy did not appear.

"It might be, boys," said one of the men, hopefully, "that our fellows on the Watchdog were too much for them and instead of getting the worst of it have turned in and captured the whole crowd of them."

As the afternoon advanced and still no signs of Garth and his men, this idea began to take strong hold of them, and they grew to doubt whether the smugglers would return to visit the schooner that day at all.

Owing to this they became somewhat careless about keeping concealed and so were seen by the smugglers when the latter at last unexpectedly appeared.

"The cat's out of the bag, boys," said one of the men. "Our little scheme of allowing them to come aboard while we kept out of sight and then pouncing on them, is all knocked in the head. Now we have got to keep our eyes open."

Without replying to the idle bantering with which the men on the schooner greeted them, the smugglers turned their boat about and made off down the stream again.

All was quiet after that until the "Watchdog's" gun boomed out, startling the Revenue men in the swamp and making them wonder at the cause of it.

They were convinced of one thing and that was that the smuggler gang would not allow them to remain on the schooner without an effort to dislodge them and so they kept a constant look-out in expectation of an attack.

It was about an hour after the appearance of Garth and his men that the attack came, but as the reader knows, the men on the schooner were not surprised.

After the discomfited outlaws had disappeared in the woods on the island, Eb said, as he made a motion with his hand in that direction:

"Dem fellers is camped back among dem trees dar. Dey'll pitch inter us ag'in befo' long, see if dey don't."

Then he scratched his head for several minutes while a serious look overspread his comical countenance.

Finally he uttered an ejaculation of delight, and clapped his hands together in a gleeful way.

"What's ailin' yer, nigger?" asked two or three of his companions.

"Gemmen," said Eb, again looking serious and as dignified as possible. "I'se got a scheme, a great big one."

Then for several minutes he and the others had their heads very close together while Eb talked in a low tone, at the same time grinning hugely.

Eb's "scheme" was very simple and at the same time would be effective if carried out.

It was simply to deprive the gang of their boat; loose the schooner and let her

float down the stream with the ebbing tide to open water.

The outlaws, without a boat, would be forced to remain on the island while the men on the schooner could sail her out to the cutter and take easy possession as all but two or three of the smuggler gang were with Garth on the island.

Eb lost no time in performing his part. He slipped into the water, stole cautiously along the shores of the island until he reached the place where the outlaws' boat was tied. Then he cut it loose, towed it back to the schooner and went aboard again. The boat was fastened to the vessel.

Then the hawsers securing the schooner to the trees on shore, were cut and she began to glide slowly away, moved by the slight current and the ebbing tide.

Before they cut loose entirely they succeeded in turning the vessel's head downstream and they expected no difficulty now in guiding her into open water.

When half the distance to the coast had been covered, however, the schooner struck a snag, her bow went plunging into the bank and she came to a stop.

They went to work to free her from her position but their efforts were in vain—the vessel would not budge.

Moreover, the ebbing tide, which had now turned strongly, jammed her tighter against the obstruction, and the water falling as the tide ebbed caused the schooner to settle lower and lower and to become more firmly planted in her unfortunate position.

By the time they had at last exhausted all their efforts and their strength, night had settled down, and it was quite dark.

"Wal, we can't get her loose to-night," drawled one of the men, "but there ain't nothing as I see, ter prevent us taking the boat and pulling out to the 'Watchdog.' I don't guess any three or four of Garth's men, if there happens to be that many left on board, which I don't believe there is, can have much show of stopping us fellers from taking possession of our own boat if we take the notion, eh, boys?"

There was a little laugh at this, and the plan as above proposed, was decided on. In fact it was the officer in charge of them who made the proposition and consequently no one would have dreamed of objecting.

The privations and discomforts they had undergone had for the time made the officer feel that they were all equal and he made himself one of them instead of keeping haughtily aloof as would have been the case aboard ship.

The boat captured from the smugglers belonged to the cutter and so was kept towed astern that it might be restored to its proper place on the "Watchdog."

So the schooner was abandoned and the Revenue men, bending vigorously to their work, rapidly pulled out of the swamp.

At last the coast was reached and all looked toward the spot where the cutter had been lying.

They had expected a light or two to indicate her position but there was none.

The night was dark though starlit, and it was impossible to see for any great distance over the waste of waters.

They knew, however, just where she had been lying, and pulled steadily for it.

But when that vicinity was reached, the cutter was not there. This they discovered by rowing back and forth over the spot where she had been.

"Where in thunder is she?" muttered one of the men.

"Hail her!" ordered the officer.

The fellow rose and cried in a voice that could have been heard to the shore and beyond:

"Hello the Watchdog."

He repeated it three or four times, but no answer came out of the darkness.

They rowed backward and forward over a

large extent of water, until fully satisfied that the vessel was not in that vicinity.

The hours passed, and still they searched. At last the moon rose, lighting up the sea for them. But no Watchdog was in sight.

CHAPTER XIII.

DOWNED AT LAST.

CAPTAIN BRONSON and his men were in a quandary, from which they saw no way to extricate themselves.

He was confident that his vessel would again fall into the hands of the smugglers.

His only way of leaving the swamp was by the schooner, and not then unless she could be loosed from her position.

It was about two-thirty o'clock in the morning now, and the tide was on the flood.

Captain Bronson and his men went to work to remove the snag by the aid of ropes and hooks, and at last had the satisfaction of being rewarded with success.

There was considerable of a current in the stream at this point, and the vessel began to glide away through the swamp, but so slowly as to be almost imperceptible.

Such was the impatience of the men that she seemed scarcely to move at all, but finally she stole lazily out of the swamp and into the waters of the Gulf.

The sails were raised and the schooner brought about, her head turned to the north.

The breeze was very light, but enough to fill her sails, and as the schooner was built for speed, and playing the fugitive successfully if chased by Revenue vessels, she slipped along smartly.

Captain Bronson was determined that if the cutter was still at the inlet—and he had good reasons to think she still was—and in the hands of Garth and his men, to regain possession if it cost him his own life and the lives of all his crew who were with him.

His men were equally anxious for a fight for they were burning for a chance to wipe out the defeats and discomfitures put upon them by the audacious outlaws.

They were well-armed and possessed a good supply of ammunition and in their present frame of mind would be only too glad for a chance to use them.

If the smugglers showed fight, which they probably would, a desperate battle would result.

At the end of about a half-hour the schooner arrived off the inlet.

Captain Bronson with his glass in his hand, was gazing shoreward.

"The cutter is still there," said he, quietly to Billy, who was standing by his side.

Closer in glided the schooner.

On, on, she crept, until the "Watchdog," lying there so quietly at her mooring, was not over twenty-five yards away.

In the bright rays of the moon, numerous figures could be seen on deck, their arms glittering in the silvery light.

Captain Bronson noted this and looked thoughtful.

"Billy, my boy," said he, "they are prepared for us. You see yourself what we have before us. Garth and his men again have the cutter in their hands and are awaiting us in battle array. But they will not have it long," biting his mustache fiercely, "without sacrificing their lives. There is going to be a fearful fight, that is plainly seen. My men will take that cutter out of their power if they have to kill the last man of them. I am going to run up alongside and board that vessel in regular old-fashioned private style."

The schooner's sails were lowered and she glided up to the cutter as silently as a panther on its prey.

Closer and closer she came until the sides of the vessel almost touched as she crept alongside.

Though the object was plain there had been no challenge from those on board the

"Watchdog" nor any hostile demonstrations.

Captain Bronson was not pleased at all this silence—he feared it was the calm that preceded the storm.

Grappling hooks were cast over the sides of the cutter and the two vessels locked together.

The men on the cutter had changed their position. They were standing "company front" on the opposite side of the ship, the breech of their guns resting on the deck.

Captain Bronson and his men were at a loss to account for this unless it were that they were so ranged that they could pour in a terrific fire as quick as he and his men obtained a footing on the cutter. He had expected the battle to open before this, and to be forced to make fast to the "Watchdog" in the face of a volley of lead. Not only had the party on the cutter failed to do this but had not even lifted a finger to resist their obtaining a foothold on the steamer's decks.

Captain Bronson, fearing trickery, hesitated before exposing his men to the fire of the men on the cutter, by ordering them away from the shelter of the bulwarks behind which they were standing.

He uttered one word in a low tone, and like magic the carbines of his men were leveled at the opposite party.

He said but one word:

"Surrender!"

"We are awaiting your orders," was the reply from one of the party on the cutter, as he stepped out and saluted.

Captain Bronson started at the sound.

"Who are you?" he asked.

"Lieutenant Cockrell and company who left last night under the leadership of Billy Brine to capture the smugglers."

Billy uttered a little cry of surprise as he recognized the voice as that of the officer who had had charge of the blue-jackets the night before, though the expedition was really under the command of Billy himself.

The officer had at the time, showed some signs of resenting his being superseded by an outsider and one as young as Billy, and the latter noticed a tinge of sarcasm in his tone as he made the reply.

In another minute Captain Bronson and his men were on board the cutter, and the men were sent below.

"Come into the cabin, lieutenant," said the captain. "I want to have this matter explained. I do not understand it. I expected to find the vessel in possession of Garth and his gang and mistook you for them. Was all prepared for a red-hot fight."

The officer laughed and said, as he seated himself opposite the captain:

"You need not worry about Garth and his gang any more, for they are where they can do you no more harm," and noticing Captain Bronson's puzzled look, hastened to explain.

He related all that had occurred after Eb rescued them, to their abandoning the schooner and putting out into the Gulf to find the cutter.

"We hung around until moonrise, thinking we might have missed the cutter in the dark, although we were sure we hadn't and we called out half a dozen times every hour. The cutter was not in those waters, that was certain. Then the nigger Eb declared he believed he knew where the Watchdog was, and spoke of a place young Brine had mentioned to him as a good spot to have the cutter lay while campaigning against the smugglers. This is the spot he mentioned."

"Yes," said Captain Bronson, "he spoke of it to me some time ago."

"So we made for it," went on the lieutenant, "and sure enough here was the cutter, safe and sound. We were surprised to learn that you had gone out to have another tilt with Garth and his gang. You were expected to return before daylight."

"I stayed on deck—the rest of the boys except the watch, went below.

"As we stood there wondering when you would return, we heard and saw a boat approaching from shore.

"There was no doubt in our minds but what it was you and your party.

"Of course we remembered the trick Garth and his men had played on you the night before when in the disguise of our boys but we had left Garth and his men imprisoned on a desert island so to speak, and moreover, we had his boat, or rather the boat he had stolen from the cutter, and consequently we never dreamed that the sharp rascal was again slipping up to us until they were almost upon us and the moonlight shone full upon the face of Garth as he sat in the stern of the boat facing us.

"The watch had not made the discovery and had already lowered the ladder.

"It was too late to repulse them now, but I resolved that we should not fall such an easy prey as you were the night before, and I hurried below and roused the men.

"When we reached the deck Garth and his men were standing in a bunch, laughing among themselves at the big haul they had made.

"Before they were aware of our presence my men had them covered. I threatened them with instant death if they did not surrender at once, and I meant what I said, too.

"They did as they were ordered and were marched below and confined where they are at this minute. Their victory had been short lived.

"Nothing more happened until you arrived. Seeing the schooner coming up we suspected you had stumbled onto it in some way and managed to get her loose again. And now, captain, I believe that is all. After many ups and downs in the struggle with Garth and his men you are victorious; the smuggler gang are prisoners on board your vessel, and their schooner is your prize and lying alongside. What more would you want?"

"I am satisfied with the way it has ended," replied Captain Bronson, calmly, "and I will confess that I shall breathe a good deal easier now, for these men have given me no end of worry. That fellow Garth is the pluckiest, sharpest, most audacious law-breaker I have ever been pitted against."

"If it had not been for that darky they would still have the upper hand and us fellows would now be penned up in that house on that miserable island in the swamp. It's to him more than to that chap Brine that we owe our success. That nigger is a brick."

"I have no fault to find with Billy Brine," replied the captain in a way that told he would brook no disparaging remarks about his young friend. "They are both heroes and have done us good service. And you too, lieutenant, are entitled to your share of thanks."

The officer bowed and took his leave.

Before he left, Captain Bronson ordered him to send Billy Brine and his mulatto friend to him.

Eb's eyes were big with awe and he kept timidly behind Billy as they entered the cabin in answer to the summons.

"Boys," said the captain, smiling as he warmly grasped their hands, "you have both done well. I want to thank you for it and promise you that you will not be forgotten by the Revenue Department."

When the two friends left, Eb was chuckling with delight.

"Well, Eb," said Billy, with a yawn, "I ain't hankerin' after rewards for doing my duty towards upholding the law, but I am a-thinkin' we deserve a good rest after all our roughing it. Captain Sam Garth and his gang are at last downed for good. Our work is over. Let's hunt up our bunks and turn in."

THE END.

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